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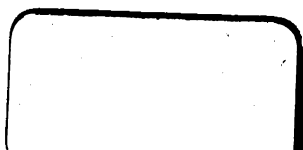
THE R.

STORY
for
Children





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ESTHER

A Story for Children

BY
GERALDINE BUTT
AUTHOR OF "CHRISTMAS ROSE," "LADS AND LASSES," ETC.

"A stone that is fit for the wall will not be left in the way."

Numerous Woodcut and Chromograph Illustrations



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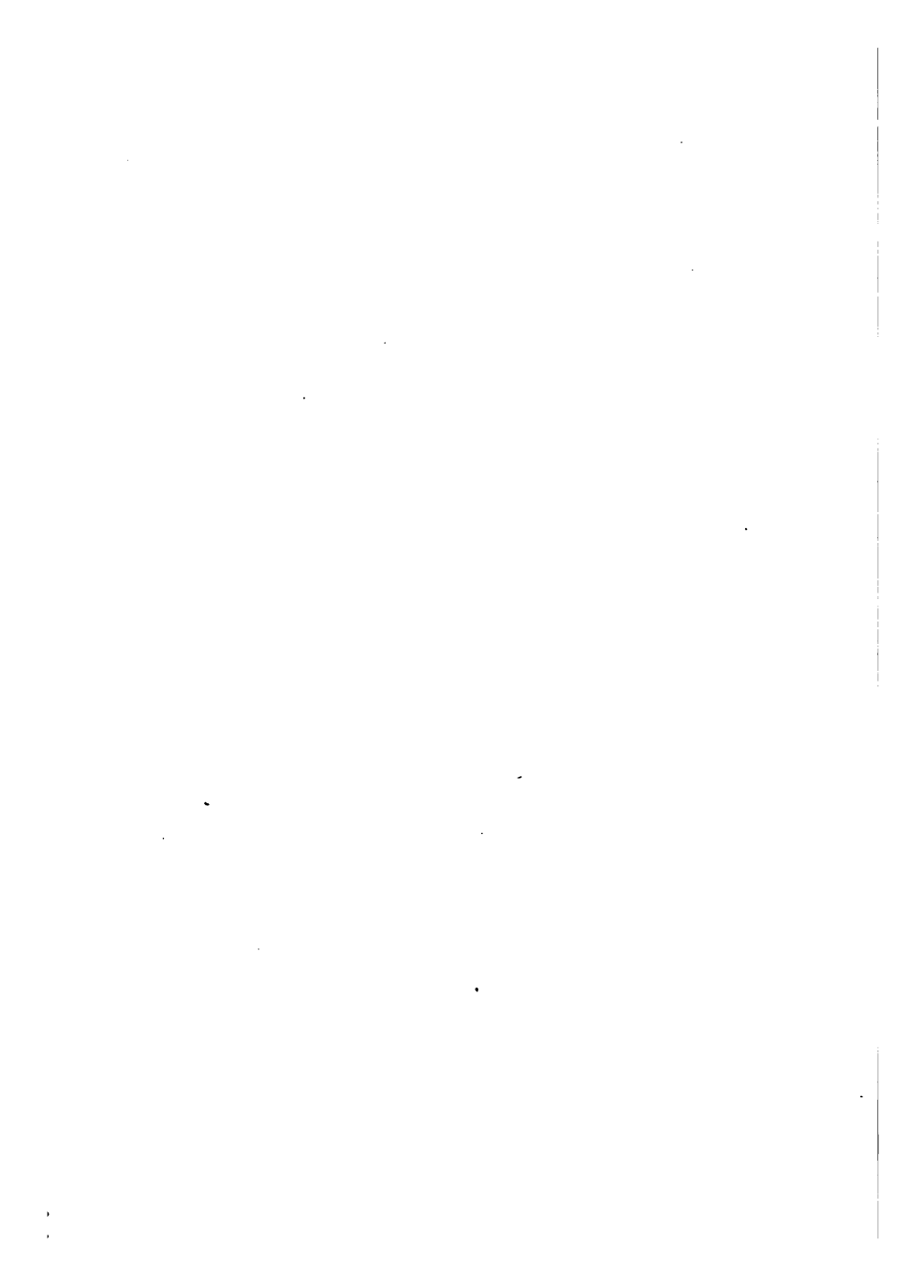


Dedicated

TO THE CHILDREN

**WHO ARE AT ONCE THE GENTLEST AND SEVEREST CRITICS
THAT "ESTHER" WILL EVER KNOW—**

MAISIE, MINNIE, AND FRED ALLHUSEN.





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ESTHER.

CHAPTER I.

AT SEA.

"A summer sea and a smiling sky."

I DON'T see any harm in it; do you?" Philip Chester, standing on the pebbly beach of Milford, and looking wistfully out at the moaning sea, asked this question a little anxiously of the bright, brisk girl who was sitting on the shingle at his feet, making ducks and drakes of the flattest stones, with an admiring crowd round her.

"Harm!" she said, looking up with mischievous eyes into Philip's. "Why, how could there be? We *must* do something, because Satan finds some mischief still, you know; and there is nothing so perfect as a boat."

"But the children?" objected Philip faintly, as he moved slowly towards a small boat drawn up upon the beach a few yards off.

"They must come too, of course," said Essie decidedly, whereat a perfect roar of gratitude went up from the group of children. "Let me see. Miss Agnew has gone to the library to choose a book. We may count upon an hour. Now, children, go and help Phil, and we will have some fun."

Philip and Esther Chester were the eldest children of a family of five. Healthy, happy, mischievous children they were too—always restless, always in trouble, until sometimes even long-suffering Miss Agnew gave up in despair, and took them to their grandmother for reproof and punishment. But grandmamma never punished; she used only to put up her sweet old face and darkened eyes—for grandmamma was blind—and the children were quiet in an instant, and had their arms round her neck, with tears and protestations and resolves, all made to be broken next day. For these children had grown up under grandmamma's wing while their father and mother were in India, and very much they had enjoyed

their life so far. At present they had come to Milford for six weeks of sea-side air, and, as Miss Agnew said, sighing, handcuffs, and thumbscrews would not keep them quiet.

So the boat was launched—a little cockleshell affair that bobbed up and down uncomfortably when once it was afloat, for the tide had turned and the wind had risen, although the children were too full of their scheme to notice such trifles, only Jimmy, a little ragged boy, who was standing looking on, with his hands in his pockets, cried out “that it was growing dark, and looked uncommon like a storm.”

Phil lifted his eyes for a moment from the water to the drifting clouds, and then he said, “Never mind, Jim, just lend us a hand, will you? Here, Essie, haul in the children.”

Essie was in in a moment, standing erect upon the seat, and reaching out her hand to the clamorous children, and Jim was lifting them in from the beach like bales of goods, while his own sister, Poll, standing a little distance off, nursed the baby with solemnity.

“Jump in, Jim,” cried Essie, with excitement, as the last child stumbled over the

seats and fell full length into the bottom of the boat. "Grumphie, you count us!"—this to a little fat fellow who was balancing himself on the edge of the boat, and dipping his hands into the water.

"There's me, and you, and Jim," began the child hurriedly, without looking up, "and that's three; and Chrissie, that's four; and oh! Phil, that's five; and I'm glad to say there isn't baby, and that would be six."

"Oh! take the oar, Jim," said Essie, panting. "Chrissie, where are you? What are you hiding your head in the bottom of the boat for? Do you think you are an ostrich?"

"You can't make *me* think so," said Grumphie. "I feel quite well, thank you," came up a quavery, smothered voice, "only I like lying here. I feel quite *fond* of lying down."

"Miss Chrissie don't feel well, maybe," said the boy Jim with a grin. "Father says brandy's the best thing, if so be as you have any."

"Well, we have not," said Essie, looking thoughtfully at the back of Chrissie's tumbled hair.

"We have cold tea, though," said Grumphie,

almost falling overboard in his excitement; "we were going to have tea out, you know, and I brought it here."

"I don't think it would be quite the same, though," said Jim.

"Beastly stuff," said Phil; "keep still, Grumph."

"I see waves," cried the child presently again, as the boat dipped down, and a wash of water made a splash against the side.

Phil looked hurriedly down at the dark green sea, that, far away, was beginning to show ridges of white surf, as it rolled shorewards; but Jim turned his face up to examine the sky. It was quite twilight now—about eight o'clock, he judged—and the evening was made darker by drifting clouds that had hurried up from the north-east and were closing in over the town; he was startled, too, when he turned to look, to see that only a very faint grey line showed where the town had been.

Essie had drawn little Chrissie's head upon her knee, and was sitting uncomfortably, telling stories, to make her and Grumphie laugh, when Phil's voice broke in pettishly—

"Do stop those stupid stories, Essie ; hadn't we better go home ?"

"Yes ; perhaps," said Essie, looking vacantly out at the tossing water, "the children are tired. Can you turn the boat round, you two ?"

"No, of course not," said Philip, still crossly, and still with his face turned away.

"The fact is, Miss Essie," said Jim's clear shrill voice, "we've been drifting this long while, and the tide's going out, and Master Phil and me we can't manage the oars."

If Essie's face grew white for a minute there was certainly no one to see it, for she stooped and kissed Grumphia, laughing, before she rose up to take the command. "We are like Christopher Columbus," she said, "looking for a new world. A penny to anyone who sees land first."

"There's the sand-bank," said Jim, doubtfully.

The sand-bank was long and low and dangerous. It lay a little to the east of the harbour mouth, and at low tide it was a snare to unwary boats ; but Essie jumped at the idea with alacrity.

"Are we near it ?" she said. "Could we

guide ourselves any way, even if the tide is too strong for rowing? Jim, you know best."

"Oh! I know," said Jim, "we're close upon it any way, Miss Essie; but once on, the tide rises, you see, and who's to see us?"

"Never mind," said Essie resolutely; "we won't look forward. Now, Chrissie, the lookout! and the sand-bank counts for land."

Nobody saw the sand-bank, however, until a shiver ran through the boat, and with a faint, grating sound, she lurched a little to one side, and then righted. Jim was out in an instant, over his ankles in water, and Essie by his side; but Essie's heart beat so fast that her hands seemed paralysed.

"Is the tide coming in?" she whispered hoarsely.

"No, Miss Essie, thank God," said the lad, whispering too; "going out."

It was no wonder they had not seen the sand-bank until they were close upon it, for as yet there was almost an inch of water all over it, much to Grumphie's delight, when Essie drew off his socks and let him splash about on the soft sand.

Chrissie, too, revived a little, and raised her

quiet little face for Essie to kiss, and rubbed her eyes, and laughed at Grumphie, but she did not follow his example, and paddle too. She said she was tired, and leant up against the boat, shivering.

"What a mite of a place," grumbled Philip, as he crept cautiously about in the semi-darkness; "there's hardly room for the boat."

"Did you expect a desert island, with palms and kangaroos and bread-fruit?" said Essie, trying to laugh. "And there won't be room for the boat long. Oh! Jim, see!" for a deeper wave had come floating and dashing over the ridges of sand, and the boat had drifted back with it towards the land.

"That's sad luck," said Jim, quietly.

"It's horrible," said Philip, growing white suddenly, and shaking like an old man. "Oh, Essie! Essie!"

"Well," said Essie, cheerily, "who's afraid? Phil, dear Phil, don't frighten the children."

"When the boat goes home," said Chrissie's quiet voice, "what will grandmamma say?"

"Grannie can't see," said Grumphie promptly.

"But Miss Agnew can."

"Only the boat won't go knocking at our

front door," said Essie laughing, and touching gently Chrissie's chilled fingers; "and long, long before then we shall be telling granny everything."

"Sitting by the warm fire on our own stools," supplemented Chrissie.

All of a sudden Grumphie's voice rose clamorously—

"I want to be at home," he said; "I hate the sea. Essie, take me back; bring us our little boat and take us home."

Essie's mischievous eyes grew bright and patient. "Come here, poor Grumphie," she said; "come, all of you, and let us think, and think, and think about getting home."

"First let us shout," suggested Jim. "It is not so very far from the harbour, after all."

"But there is nobody on the pier," objected Essie; "however, we may as well try."

There would have been something piteous to anyone standing by in hearing those shrill young voices send shout after shout across the turbulent water. Jim's voice was deep and strong, and Phil's was clear, but the others' were weak and wavering, and Chrissie's ended in a sob.

"It's no use," said Grumphie, his lips quivering; "if Phil was not here I would cry."

"Don't cry," said Essie, patiently; "say something out of your texts or your hymns. Say 'The Lord is my shepherd.'"

Chrissie shivered.

"I think we are more like the 'ninety and nine,'" she said, "and the one lost. Perhaps we shall be saved too."

"I pray so," said Essie simply; "and now we'll light a bonfire."

"A bonfire!" said Grumphie eagerly.

His eyes were dried in an instant and opened wide. Even Phil lifted his white dejected face hopefully to Essie's.

"I have matches," said Essie, "and we must burn some of our clothes. We have one oar, you know. We must plant it in the sand and tie the things on, and set light to it."

"Oh! a fire! a fire! a fire!" shouted Grumphie, half wild with excitement, dancing round the oar like an Ashantee savage round a human sacrifice. "Oh! how splendid! oh, what fun! Quick, Essie, quick!"

But Essie's brave fingers trembled a little, and the match fell upon the wet sand.

"Let me do it," said Phil; "girls are so stupid."

Without a word, Essie held out the second match to him with a forced laugh.

"Miss Essie's not stupid, anyway," said Jim, sturdily.

There was a smouldering, a smell of smoke, a crackle, and then a shout from Grumphie.

"It's like the Queen's Birthday," he cried; "like a greasy pole; like a real desert island; like—heaven."

"Now shout," cried Essie, excitedly. "I see some one on the pier."

The voices were louder, shriller, clearer this time, with a ring of hope in them, and Essie's heart beat almost to suffocation, when the dim outlines of figures were visible on the pier, and a man began to creep down the steps to the boat-house; the man had a lantern, and as he crawled slowly down, it seemed to Essie's blurred sight as if he were a glowworm, whose light would presently be extinguished in the sea.

Then there came a shout—a strong shout of men's voices—that rang out with answering hope to the little white-faced group round the oar.

The light that had flared up, blown hither

and thither by the wind a minute or two ago, now died away as suddenly, and the sparks and tinder fluttered down in dangerous proximity to the scared children. They were in total darkness again, a deeper darkness it seemed than before, by reason of the momentary flickering light that had dazzled their eyes.

"I hear a boat," said Phil. "I hear oars! How dark it is!"

"And so stormy," said Chrissie, shrinking.

"It looked quite smooth and blue from the shore," said Grumphy—"I mean the sea. Didn't it, Essie?"

"I'll make up a parable," said Essie suddenly. "Directly I get home I will write it down. This is it—'Waters that look smooth——'"

"And blue," put in Grumphy.

"'And blue when you are far away, are quite stormy when you get into them,' only I will make it longer, of course."

"Particularly when you finds yourself in 'em without a boat," said the boy Jim, in the background.

"And the moral of that is?" said Phil.

"Stay at home and only look at them," said little Chrissie.



CHAPTER II.

AN ANXIOUS EVENING.

"Fortune brings in some boats that are not steered."

MEANWHILE two people, walking up and down, up and down, upon the pebbles in perfect silence, had paused suddenly and turned to the sea. One, the younger of the two, put up both her hands quickly to her throat, as if she were choking—but before she had time to speak, a soft, slow voice questioned her—

"And Annie, my dear, it was just here you left them?"

"Just here."

"Don't be afraid," said grandmamma, turning her blind eyes towards the roaring sea. "They got tired of waiting, you see, and Essie has dragged them off for a walk. We all know Essie."

"Lady Everard," said Miss Agnew, in a sobbing kind of voice, "there is a strange light out at sea—such a strange light."

"A fisherman, of course;" but grand-mamma's own sweet voice trembled suddenly.

"They *must* be on shore," she said, standing still and speaking quickly, while a faint nervous flush rose in her soft cheeks. "They would have gone to the cliffs or the rocks. You think so, Annie, too, surely?"

"I cannot think," said Miss Agnew, fairly crying.

"Tell me about the light," said Lady Everard gently.

"It is a flaring, flickering kind of light," said Annie's eager voice, "and there is one answering from the shore. "Look, dear Lady Everard," putting up her other hand to still the trembling of the one on which the old lady rested. "Ah! it has gone out."

"Gone out!" echoed Lady Everard, in a dull voice; "and the answering light? Look out for me, Annie, my dear, and see."

"It is in a boat," said Miss Agnew, straining her eyes into the grey uncertain light.

"Listen ! they are making for the sand-bank. I think it is some one tide-bound."

"But not the children, of course," said grandmamma's trembling voice.

"Oh ! surely not !" answered Miss Agnew.

But for all that, Lady Everard drew her hand away from Miss Agnew's arm, and, kneeling down upon the damp sand, felt up and down with her delicate fingers.

"The tide is going out still," she said ; and then she rose up, and put out her hand, in the helpless way peculiar to the blind, until it reached Annie's, and so they stood side by side, silently.

"Tell me," she said presently—"can you see anything now?"

"My eyes are getting accustomed to the dark," said Miss Agnew ; "I see a little group of people on the sand-bank, and the boat is almost there."

"Go on," said Lady Everard, breathing quickly.

"The boat has touched," she said in a low voice. "I see one, two, three, four, five little figures being lifted in. Oh ! Lady Everard, can it be our children?"

She felt the hand she held grow suddenly cold as death, and then Lady Everard said quite quietly—

“And we ought to be thankful, Annie, if it is. Let us go home.”

But Annie shrank back.

“I cannot bear to go,” she said; “not yet.”

“Well, wait,” said grandmamma; “I am only tired, rather, and we could have waited at home, you know. I am too old,” she went on, quietly smiling, “to be strong enough to meet either joy or sorrow half-way. We old folks have that gift of patience.”

Without a word, Miss Agnew turned resolutely from the sea, and they two went home together.

Half-an-hour later on, the door of the drawing-room at home was thrown violently open, and four drenched, miserable figures stood upon the threshold. Grandmamma, sitting in her low arm-chair by the fire, was not knitting, although the light flickered on the needles lying in her lap. She was sitting quite idle, with her hands folded together, and on the centre table there were four great smoking basins of bread and milk.

"We have come back—come back," cried Essie, in her young untired voice. "Grannie, are you very glad? Oh! don't cry."

"Am I crying?" said grandmamma, smiling, and raising her hand to brush away a suspicious tear. "I have been waiting so long, you see. Come in, dear child, and let me feel you. Is Georgie there?"

"I'm all right," said Grumphie, yawning, "only I *am* tired, and so's Chrissie. Chrissie didn't feel very well, grandmamma."

"She was quite ill," broke in Essie, with a slight laugh, "and Jim said brandy was a good thing, but we had none, you know."

"We had cold tea, though," said Grumphie.

"Well, take your bread and milk," said Lady Everard, smiling, "and tell me afterwards, and to-morrow I must scold you."

"Must you really?" said Grumphie, looking up, with his spoon in his plump hand; "I'm awfully sorry to hear that."

"Let me tell you now, grannie," pleaded Essie, sinking to her knees on the rug at Lady Everard's feet. "Jim said we had better not go because of a storm, but it looked so jolly,

and I thought it would be such fun, and Miss Agnew had gone for an hour."

"And Phil?" said grandmamma suddenly, "did you have nothing to say to it?"

Philip started. "Of course I had, grannie," he said; "Jim and me, we hauled the boat in."

"It was just splendid," said Grumphie, laying down his spoon and coming to stand on the rug beside Essie. "The waves were like thunder, and when we got to the sand-bank we lit a bonfire of Chrissie's pinafore and mine, and we shoved it up on an oar—oh, miles high! I tell you, grandmamma, it was just splendid."

"But not quite right—eh, Grumphie?" said grandmamma in her sweetest voice.

"Oh, I don't know about that," said Grumphie, with the air of one who did not care to know. "And I think you've forgot, grannie, that you thought you would not scold us till to-morrow."

"Well, go back to your bread and milk, my dear, in case I forget again; and Essie, you eat something too. Are you not hungry, my dear? Are you cold?"

"Oh! very cold," said Essie, shivering. "No,

thank you, grandmamma, I could not eat. I feel tired. I feel a little ill."

"Then go to bed, dear child," said grandmamma, in quick alarm; "only tell me first who Jim is."

"Jim! the fisherman's son," said Essie, surprised. "Don't you know him? he's a great friend of ours. He—oh! Phil, you tell about him; I am tired."



She put her head down upon her grandmother's knee, and shut her eyes—all the room seemed to be darkening and reeling round her—grandmamma's voice speaking seemed to be miles away. Miss Agnew's arm round her shoulders seemed slipping from her.

"Hold me! hold me!" she cried, clutching

aimlessly in the air with her stiffened fingers, and then she swayed suddenly to one side, and would have fallen, but for Miss Agnew.

“And she seemed quite the least tired of us all,” said Chrissie, composedly, looking up with wide-open eyes from a picture-book after Essie had been put to bed, and Miss Agnew had said she was “tired out.”





CHAPTER III.

THE BOY JIM.

"Suffering is the badge of all our tribe."

"THE boy Jim is in the kitchen, Lady Everard," said Miss Agnew a minute or two later on; "will you see him?"

"Certainly I will," said Lady Everard. "Tell Burns to send him here, please, Annie. And Chrissie, my dear, I think you and Grumphie had better go to bed."

"Oh! please let us wait till after Jim," said Grumphie, discontentedly; "and, grandmamma, they all talked so, I could not ask you how you knew we were in the boat at all?"

"I know most things," said grandmamma, seriously. "Hush! is that Jim?"

It was Jim, heralded by Miss Agnew, and followed by Burns; and this is Jim's portrait as he stood for a moment in the doorway,

looking wistfully into the pleasant lighted room.

A boy, small of his age—he was “nigh upon fifteen”—with a sunburnt, freckled face, a wide mouth, and shy eyes; with a perfect thatch of reddish hair, smoothly parted in the middle. He wore a fisherman’s blue jersey and short ragged trousers, that flapped damply uncomfortable against his bare legs. He came into the room after a moment’s pause, and looked with his intensely hungry eyes at the last bowl of bread and milk, that was getting cold.

“Come here,” said grandmamma; “bring him nearer to me, Annie.”

“Stand upon the rug,” said Chrissie, standing on the bar of her chair, and leaning over the table so as to see his feet. “It is ever so much softer there.”

“Essie’s fainted,” observed Grumphy.

“Has she, now?” said Jim, interested. “My word! and no wonder, too. No, thank you, Miss Chrissie, the rug’s a deal too fine for wet feet.”

Grandmamma could not certainly see the honest, pleasant, boyish face, but she could hear how young and fresh the voice was, and it was a voice that pleased her.

"So you know my children already, I hear," she said gently. "It was kind of you to go with them this afternoon—they were so wrong to get into a boat at all."

"They didn't know, you see," said Jim, nervously twisting his cap round and round. "But I fish about a deal with Tom, and I've learned about storms and such like."

"I am glad you went," repeated Lady Everard.

"I didn't think of it at first," said Jim, truthfully. "When I see Master Philip a hauling of the boat, I thought, you see, as how he understood it."

"How should I understand it?" said Philip, gruffly; "how could you think so?"

Jim was silenced.

"Hush, Philip," said Miss Agnew, severely, "and let Jim tell his own story. Grumphy, go to bed—you were fast asleep."

"I—was—not," whimpered Grumphy—whose real name was George—as his head sank down upon his arms again.

"Phil, carry him upstairs to nurse," said grandmamma.

"Now, Jim, tell me about yourself. Where do you live? Is Tom your brother?"

"He's the eldest of us," said Jim, with a certain straightening of himself and a lifting of his head, as if he was proud of "Tom." "Then there's me—then Poll—and Martin—and baby."

"And what does Tom do?" asked Lady Everard.

"He fishes now," said Jim, mournfully. "He was in the mines before; he was buttymaster up to Silverdale, getting on famously—and now——"

"Now?" prompted Miss Agnew.

"Well, mother took weak and sickly after father's illness, and ain't of much account, and father's give over fishing."

"But why?" said Lady Everard, perplexed; "surely you must need him to work more than ever."

"Ay! that we do," said the lad quickly, and lowering his voice, "only he can't, you see. Father's gone silly."

"Poor father!" said Lady Everard.

"And Tom," went on the boy eagerly, "he were getting on so well and all that, but when

he saw how weakly mother was, and father so sad-like, he give it all up, you see, and come home."

"Poor Tom," said Lady Everard. "I am sure he is a good man. Well, I will look you up to-morrow. Annie, give the lad Essie's bread and milk, and let him stay as long as he likes in the kitchen. Good-night, Jim."

"Good-night, my lady," said Jim, giving the benefit of his best bow to "my lady's" sightless eyes, and then he went away comforted. After he had finished his supper, he opened the kitchen door and went out into the still summer evening whistling. He ran stumbling and jumping over the rough stones, with a smile still about his mouth, and his hands in his pockets.

Presently a tall figure, with a net over its shoulder, loomed dimly before him, and a voice said, "You, lad! come along."

"Had a good day?" said Jim.

"Oh, ay," said the man wearily; "good enough. Here we are."

Jim's whistling stopped suddenly, and his face sobered. He pushed the rickety door a little further open, so that Tom could pass in with the nets, then he stood for a minute looking.

He saw no fire—no light—no welcome of happy voices—only Polly washing the baby at



the far end of the room, while his mother rinsed out some clothes by the door, wrung them out, and hung them on a chair wearily, as if life itself

were a burden. His little brother Martin was sobbing over a sum on the window-sill, and on the sofa, immediately opposite, sat a solitary figure—the figure of an old, bent man, with snow-white hair and a vacant look, who sat with his hands feebly clasped, mumbling out broken, foolish words.

Jim opened the door wider and passed in.

And it was for this that Tom had “give up” everything, and come home!





CHAPTER IV.

THE NEXT DAY.

"Thereby hangs a tale."

"**I** FEEL *dreadful!*" said Essie, coming late into the breakfast room next morning, and pettishly pulling down the blinds, so as to shut out the sun. "Miss Agnew, look at me, and see what can be the matter."

"Tired, perhaps," said Miss Agnew, kissing the bright face that was whiter than usual.

"Come, are you ready for a nice cup of tea?"

"Oh yes, please," said Essie, wearily.

"Grandmamma, are you listening? I will tell you my symptoms. I have a dull kind of aching all over my head, and I feel as if I had been walking on stones all night, and I *long*—positively long—to say or do something disagreeable to somebody—to fly at some one and hit them. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I think I do," said grandmamma, laughing. "Now let me cure you. First of all, we will ask Miss Agnew for a holiday; then you shall all come and sit quietly in my room for an hour or two, while I talk to you. Does that suit everyone?"

Everyone apparently but Grumphie, who had lifted up one of the blinds cautiously, and was catching flies in his plump fingers.

"It's so sunny out of doors," he said. "Grannie, let me go out?"

"Not this morning," said grandmamma.

"Is this our punishment?" asked Grumphie, dolorously, pausing in his occupation.

"You naughty, disagreeable boy," cried Essie, sharply; "come and apologise to grandmamma immediately; and if you don't leave those flies alone, we will none of us ever speak to you again as long as we live—never!"

"They are for my little green frog," said Grumphie, with quivering lips.

Essie seized him by the arm, and began dragging him across to grandmamma. Grumphie kicked and struggled vigorously, and finally set up a dismal howl. Chrissie looked on, in open-mouthed astonishment.

"Leave him alone, Essie," said Miss Agnew, "and don't pull him about like that. Grumphie, what are you crying for? I do not believe you know yourself."

"Oh yes, I do," sobbed Grumphie, "it's—
it's—Essie."



"Oh! of course it's me," said Essie petulantly; "it's always me. Very well, I shall just go and wait by myself in grand mamma's room. My ache is turning to earache."

Never were there such distracting children as the little Chesters on that hot July morning, but at last order was partially restored, and grandmamma felt that she could breathe again.

Essie was settled down in a comfortable chair, with a hot flannel tied over her ear, under which treatment her temper improved,

and she began to be a little ashamed of her fretfulness.

Philip, more silent than usual, and a little



sullen, took *The Little Savage*, and made himself comfortable on grandmamma's cushioned sofa, while the baby, having had the *Pilgrim's*

Progress surreptitiously provided for its amusement by the officious Grumphie, was deep in the delightful picture of "Mr. Vainglorious."

"Georgie," said Lady Everard, so suddenly that the child started, "have you anything to amuse yourself with, while I tell you a story?"

"Not if I mayn't catch flies for Jeremy, grandmamma."

"And that you may *not*," said Essie's decided voice from the depths of the arm-chair.

"You're not grannie," retorted Grumphie, quickly.

"There now!" with an evident return to hostilities.

"Hush! hush!" said grandmamma, raising her gentle voice. "Essie, be still. Georgie, my dear, you cannot stand with your hands in your pockets for three hours doing nothing."

Grumphie's hands came creeping up from the depths of his knickerbocker pockets, and Grumphie's blue eyes were raised.

"Grandmamma, you can *see*," he said sharply.

"I wish I could," she said, with a soft sigh.

Grumphie had a theory of his own that

Lady Everard could raise those white lids if she chose, and look out with eyes as eager and unsatisfied as his own into this sunshiny world.

He went up to the sofa and put his little hand out to take the *Pilgrim's Progress*, and the baby, thus interrupted in a thirst for knowledge, cried feebly.

"What am I doing now?" he asked, much in the same tone as one asks "How many fingers do I hold up?" in a game of "Blind man's buff."

"Judging from baby's cries, and the sound of your voice, I have not much difficulty in guessing," said Lady Everard. "Now, come! I want to see which of you is going to be first to say you were wrong yesterday."

"Oh! I am," said Essie, throwing herself precipitately out of the chair into a heap at grandmamma's knee. "The sea looked so smooth and tempting, and the boat was bobbing up and down, and I never thought. Oh! grannie," she broke off, despondently, "I never *do* think at the right moment, and at other times, when there is no need of it, I have the most *splendid, perfect, Christian* thoughts, that would do for a diary or anything—but,

grandmamma, when I came in last night and saw you crying, I did feel so terribly sorry! I did truly."

"Perhaps that was what made you fall down," said Grumphie, meditatively. "Oh! grannie, you can't think how pretty the jelly-fish were. I would like to have dived."

Grandmamma shuddered. She took Essie's hand and stroked it softly; then she said very low and gently—

"Philip, are you going to let Essie take all the blame?"

"No," grumbled Philip.

"Oh! he had not time to say anything," said Esther, generously; "I always talk so fast. Phil always owns things, you know, when I start him."

Philip bent lower still over *The Little Savage*, while a flush passed over his face; then he threw the book aside and came over to Essie. "It was my fault," he said, speaking very loud and fast. "I started them—I saw the boat—I wanted to go. Grandmamma, I am sorry."

"Brave boy!" was all grandmamma said, with her sweet slow smile, but Phil was quite

satisfied. Grandmamma at least understood how much easier it was for Essie to own her faults than for him.

"And now for a story," said little Chris.

"About France," said Essie.

"About horses," suggested Grumphie.

"Who remembers what happened in 1792?" asked Lady Everard, laying down her knitting.

"Oh! it's history," said Grumphie, reproachfully. "Grandmamma, I do not think that is quite fair. It might as well be lessons."

"Rubbish," said Essie. "Grannie, I know! It was the French Revolution."

"I was—let me see—five years old then, and now I am seventy-five."

"How dreadfully old," said little Chrissie, gently.

"Hush!" said Essie, laying her strong young hand gently on Lady Everard's wrinkled one. "Grandmamma is so lovely."

"And when I was five years old I was only pretty," said the old lady, "and, Grumphie, I was not blind then. We lived near Trianon, and sometimes my nurse used to take me into the crowd on the way to Paris, to see a tall lady, with a very sweet face, bow out of her

carriage windows, and the people used to shout, and throw up their caps, and press round her, until I grew frightened; and one day my nurse, who was a Frenchwoman, set me on one side of the road, and forgot me, while she went running down with the crowd in the dust of the carriage."

"Were you frightened? did you cry?" asked Grumphy, eagerly. "Oh! I forgot you weren't blind."

"No, I was not frightened; I was very happy. I threw my parasol away, and took off my mittens, and made beautiful mud pies by the road-side."

"What were you dressed in?" interrupted Essie.

"I was all pink and blue, I remember, and I had a little white cap, and mittens, and high-heeled shoes with buckles. Well, presently I crept up the green bank by the wayside, and through some wooden railings into a great field covered with daisies and buttercups. I walked about stringing the daisies into chains, until quite at the other end of the field I came to a stile, and on the other side of the stile there was an orchard. I climbed up to the second

bar and looked over at the fresh green of the apple trees, heavy with their pretty pink blossoms. Ah, well, children ! I think there were very few of those pretty flowers that ripened into fruit."

"Why?" asked Georgie, practically.

"Because long before the autumn came, the branches and the flowers had been torn down and trampled under foot."

"What a great pity," said Chrissie.

"Hush—sh—sh!" said Essie. "Go on, grannie; at the stile, you know."

"It was very quiet, I remember—so quiet that I could almost understand what the birds were saying to one another, as they chirped and twittered. I sat down on the top bar, and swung my pink shoes backwards and forwards, and then I heard a voice say close behind me—

"'Ah, monsieur! yes! permettez.'

"'But no,' answered some one quite near.

"'But there are five, sir,' said the first voice, 'and the little wren cannot count.'

"'Thou can'st not tell,' answered the man's voice.

"'Ah! see!' cried the child's voice again—
'a little demoiselle; now thou wilt not refuse.

Permit, monsieur, that I offer it to the little demoiselle ?'

"I had turned my head over my shoulder and was looking down the orchard, and I saw him coming across the long grass, over a carpet of scattered petals, holding a bird's nest carefully in both hands. I climbed down to meet him, and dropped my parasol, as I stood on tiptoe to look in at the five blue eggs. (*See Frontispiece.*)

"'Look, mademoiselle !' he cried excitedly; 'are they not lovely ? Hast thou ever seen the little egg of the wren before ?'

"He was a boy, children, taller than I was ; slight and pale, with eager, restless eyes, and thin fingers. He was dressed in silk and velvet, and when he offered me one of the eggs, he took off his hat with its long white feather, and bowed to me, holding the nest tightly to him with the other hand.

"Just then we heard a laugh behind us, and a gentleman jumped across the stile, and looked over my shoulder. 'And so my pupil has found another treasure !' he said. 'A little lady, who has spoiled her pretty shoes with the dew.'

"Then we all looked down at my feet at the soiled pink shoes, and I felt tears in my eyes.

"'Take away the egg,' I sobbed ungratefully; 'Madelon will be angry. I am so wet and tired.'

"And Madelon? where is Madelon, little one?' said the gentleman kindly, while the boy stood by abashed.

"'She is in the road,' I sobbed; 'she is running after the carriage of madame. She forgot me, and I am tired of the daisies.'

"'Madame, my mother,' said the boy, 'has gone to Paris to-day. Is it not so, monsieur? But they should not have left the little demoiselle alone.'

"'It was a folly inconceivable,' said the gentleman gravely. 'Dry thy brown eyes, and put thy arms round my neck, and I will carry thee back, little love.'"

"Did you blow the egg?" demanded Grumphy eagerly.

"Oh no," said grandmamma. "After we met Madelon, I gave it to her to hold, and she let it drop somehow, and so I lost it."

Grandmamma's face had flushed and her voice had grown excited as she told her story,

but now she turned her face to Essie, smiling.

"Madelon was running about the field, crying in wild terror, and she never scolded me for my wet shoes, when at last she had me safely in her arms again. Monsieur stroked my hair as he gave me up, and said—I have never forgotten the words, because we talked about it so often afterwards—'The good God give you a happy life;' and the boy? why, he kissed me, children, with his hat off, and his hair blowing about into his laughing eyes—that is all."

"And he was?" said Essie, breathlessly.

"Who do you think?" asked grandmamma, smiling.

"The Child of the Temple!" said Chrissie.

"Oh! grandmamma, really?"

"Yes, really," said grandmamma; "and sometimes at night, when I lie awake, and think of my long, long life, and my happy life, children, I cry to myself, thinking of how that pretty boy faded day by day within prison walls, until his soul broke its frail casket, and was free at last; and how that grand queenly head that I had only seen rising proudly above

a servile mob was laid as low as the guillotine. Poor mother ! Poor wife ! Poor queen !”

“Are you asleep, grannie ?” said Chrissie, touching her softly with gentle fingers.

“Did you think I was dreaming ?” said Lady Everard, smiling. “Well ! poor lady, if all that pain and horror was a dream, let us hope that she is awake now.”





CHAPTER V.

A FAULT AND AN APOLOGY.

"Living poems."

"**I**S that you, Philip?" said Lady Everard.

It was a most perfect morning of this perfect month, and grandmamma, tempted by the sunshine, had had a chair placed for her on the little bit of grass in front of the villa, and, with her endless knitting in her fingers, was dozing and dreaming and thinking.

A step, coming lightly up the gravel path, roused her.

The children had dragged wearily through the appointed hour of daily lessons, and had burst from the schoolroom like emancipated slaves the instant that the books were shut. Miss Agnew had taken a book and departed to a favourite retreat on the rocks, where she could enjoy her novel undisturbed, and the children

were amusing themselves. Chrissie had come and asked if she might build sand-castles with the fisherman's children, and had gone off joy-



fully with her doll in search of them. Five minutes later there had been a rush and scamper of many feet up the path into the

house, and so upstairs, and grandmamma had imagined herself in sole possession of the front garden, so when she heard those slow, reluctant feet crunching the gravel in front of her, she raised her head quickly, and called out—

“Is that you, Philip?”

There was a moment's pause; then a very baby voice answered—

“Grannie! it's me.”

“Why, Georgie,” said grandmamma, “I thought you were in bed.”

“I were in bed,” said Grumphie, confidentially; “me and baby, both two of us—at least baby were on the sofa; but, grandmamma, I saw a bird—a real live bird, and I wanted to catch it.”

“I am afraid,” said grandmamma, stretching out her hand, “that you had not shut your eyes and tried to go to sleep. I think that you had crept to the window.”

“The sun asked me,” said Grumphie, hanging his head; “he came in through the blind, so I took some salt and went out to catch my little bird.”

“Did you catch him?” said grandmamma.

Grumphie lifted his head relieved. “Not

quite," he said, "but I got a fly for Jeremy, and lots of flowers. I thought you were asleep, grandmamma," he went on, lifting his eyes frankly, "so I was going to creep past you to the boys. Oh! need I, need I go back to bed?"

"What are the boys doing?" hesitated grandmamma.

"Oh! I do not know," cried Grumphy, forgetting his fly, and opening his hands suddenly. "But I heard them laughing. Jim's up there, grannie, and Essie, and I want to go! Oh, grannie, my fly!"

"What about him?"

"He's gone."

"Poor little fly," said grandmamma; "how happy he must be!"

"Oh! but Jeremy," said Grumphy, half-sobbing. "Essie won't let me get anything for him to eat, and he loves flies, and I have to catch them as hard as I can, and he hasn't had not one for three days, and I think he *hates* beetles."

"Well, go to the boys now," said grandmamma, with cowardly anxiety to avert the threatened tears, "and we will try and think

of some other food for Jeremy. Have you no shoes on, silly boy? go and get a pair first."



So the morning wore away by quick degrees. The old dial, "marking the hours of sunshine" in the garden, might almost have neglected his duty for this one summer's day, for there was no one to notice his quick bright footsteps, except one old lady

who was dreaming of things that had happened seventy years ago, and she was blind.

All the other heedless people in the house were upstairs marking the time with shouts of childish enjoyment; shouting so loud, indeed, that when the dinner-bell rang, Lady Everard had to send nurse up to warn them.

"We are not going to wait for Miss Agnew, children," she said, as they came trooping in, with smooth hair and rosy cheeks. "Georgie,

say grace. Do you feel better for your play?"

"I saw such a funny thing, grannie," said Georgie. "I saw Nero playing with baby. Some one," hanging his head suddenly, "had left the door open by mistake, and Nero had laid his head down beside baby on the pillow, and his eyes were shut, and he were dreaming."



"Oh, Grumphie!" said Essie; "and he might have bitten our baby."

"But he didn't," said Grumphie triumphantly, "because baby was wide awake, standing on the sofa playing, and he didn't mind a bit. He liked it; so there now!"

"But he might have minded," said grand-mamma gently. "Some one," and she smiled

kindly, "must not leave the door open again, even by mistake. You will remember that, my darling?"

"I am remembering, grandmamma. I have such lots of things to remember now; only first I am going to remember something for Jeremy to eat. Don't you think he might like plums?"

"Shut up, Grumphie," said Philip. "Grandmamma, is Miss Agnew lost, do you think?"

"No, surely not," said grandmamma, laughing; "she will be here directly. She was out on the rocks."

"I like Miss Agnew to-day," said Chrissie. "Do you know, Essie, she cried the other day, about the boat, you know."

"Rubbish!" said Essie; "*she* had nothing to cry about. Had she, grannie? *We* had, if you like; and she never cries."

"Why, she never even cried over sums," said Grumphie; "she told me so—and our being lost isn't nearly so bad as sums."

"Or dates," said Chrissie.

"You know nothing about it," said Philip. "It is a different sort of thing, quite."

"And she *did* cry," persisted Chrissie.

"Here she is!" cried Grumphie suddenly ;
"let us ask her?"

"Oh ! no, no !" said Essie, sharply ; "he is a silly boy, is he not, grannie?"

"He is young, you see," said Lady Everard.

"Go on with your dinner," said Philip, severely. "You have Jeremy—and leave Miss Agnew alone."

So it chanced that there was a momentary silence in the room as Miss Agnew came in and took her seat. She laid her hat down upon the side-table, and when she had said she was sorry to be late, she came and sat close to grandmamma, and took the carving into her own hands.

The sea wind had ruffled her hair all about her face, and had faintly tinged her cheeks with a soft pink, and she looked altogether so young and pretty, that Essie stared at her in amazement.

"I have been reading," she said, "and I forgot all about you, Lady Everard, and the children, and dinner—fancy that, Grumphie—and so I am half-an-hour late. And, oh ! Lady Everard," she went on, turning to grandmamma with a little more excitement, "some

children on the beach had done such a silly, thoughtless thing."

"Oh, what?" cried Georgie, all attention in an instant.

"Why, they had tied the tail of an immense kite to a baby's perambulator, and it was going across the Parade at a fearful pace."

"Why, how jolly!" said Grumphie breathlessly. "Oh, Phil, we have never thought of that, and now," he ended mournfully, "we shall never be allowed to do it—never!"

The moral to Miss Agnew's story was not exactly what she could have wished, so she gave Grumphie a reproachful look.

"The baby might have been killed," she said.

"Oh no, not killed, I think," said Essie.

"It might have gone up like a balloon," suggested Georgie.

"Quite impossible," said Philip decidedly.

"I am so glad," said grannie, in her gentle, peacemaking way, "that our boys never play such silly, senseless pranks."

All the children looked down suddenly, and then stealthily across at one another. Philip was the first to raise his head, and speak a little defiantly—

"It depends upon what you call silly things, grandmamma?"

But before Lady Everard could define the word, a note was brought in on a tray, and the children were curious and alert instantly.

Miss Agnew took the note and opened it. "It is from Mr. Craven, the rector, so I suppose I can read it aloud at once. Georgie, if you cannot keep quiet, you can go out into the garden."

Grumphie crept down and away to the window, but he did not go out—he stood turning the Venetian shutters up and down, so that light flashed into Nero's eyes. The other children had laid down their spoons, and were listening to the letter that Miss Agnew was reading aloud.

"DEAR LADY EVERARD,—

"I am sure you cannot be aware that your grandchildren have spent the last two hours in flashing a looking-glass into all the front rooms of my house. I feel obliged to tell you, as my study is one of these rooms, and my next Sunday's sermon will suffer.

"I am,

"Very faithfully yours,

"J. B. CRAVEN."

Grumphie dropped the cords of the Venetians and flung himself upon his grandmother. "Now I may tell," he cried, in uncontrollable glee, "only before it was a secret, and we meant it to be a magnifying glass, to burn his hair, you know, and we could not find one. It *was* such fun!"

"Children!" said grandmamma

"Was there any harm?" said Essie innocently. "Indeed I never thought anyone could mind. I think Mr. Craven is extremely unkind."

"So do I," echoed Grumphie.

"I thought I could trust you," grandmamma said.

"Shall we go and apologise?" asked Essie eagerly; and before anyone could stop her, she had started from her chair, and was half-way upstairs, so that it chanced that she did not hear Miss Agnew's next speech.

"I think, Lady Everard," she said, "that the children had better not go to the fisherman's cottage just now. The little girl, Polly, is ill, and they do not know what is the matter."

"Fever?" asked grandmamma.

"It looks like it," said Miss Agnew. "She is hot and restless, and, I fancy, was delirious in the night."

"You hear, children," said Lady Everard. "Run away now, I hear Essie calling to you ; but remember not to speak to any of the children until I tell you you may."

Essie's bright young face was peeping in at the window, framed in the purple flowers of the clematis.

"Phil," she said, "you are to come too, because we all did it. On the whole," she added, quaintly, "it is just as well we did *not* use a magnifying glass."

"Just as well," said grandmamma.

"I think," said Philip, in his grumbling way, as he loitered to the door, "that Jim M'Dougal ought to come too. He was as bad as any of us."

"For shame, Phil," cried Essie in her clear loud tones, "when *we* prompted him, and asked him, and showed him ; why, that *would* be mean."

Philip coloured a little, and then, without another word, he jumped out of the window, and joined the little group upon the lawn.

The rector's house was so near that they had hardly time to grow nervous before they reached it, only Grumphie crept a little nearer to Essie's side, and squeezed her hand tightly and sighed heavily; then Philip rang the bell, and they had nothing to do but wait.

"We want," said Essie, in her imperious young voice, to the maid who opened the door, "to see Mr. Craven, if you please."

"To apologise," put in Grumphie, peeping under Esther's arm.

"Master's at lunch," said the girl.

"Will you tell him we are here," said Essie, with dignity. "Grumphie, if you *must* see, go in front."

"But master's at lunch," repeated the girl, puzzled.

"Oh, we can wait, thank you," said Essie; "we will sit down here, and we need not keep you."

Sarah was perplexed. She did not know these young people by sight, and here they were with their sandy boots, making marks all over the tiled passage. They were talking to each other quietly enough, certainly, but there was no knowing if they had come after the

umbrellas or overcoats. She was still hesitating, when the dining-room door opened, and there came into the passage a tall, handsome old man. He had a napkin in one hand, and in the other his gold-rimmed spectacles.

The children rose as he approached, and Essie, as spokeswoman, went forward.

"We came to beg your pardon," she said; "these are my brothers: we are the Chesters."

"So you are the Chesters," he said, with a quick bright smile; "and you are not ashamed to own it! Well, come in here, and let me look at you."

Essie laughed too. "We are not much to look at," she said, "and I begin to be afraid that we are not so good as we might be either. We promised grandmamma to come and apologise."

"Well! I am waiting," he said. "Go on."

"But I do not know what to say," said Essie. "Philip, you start me."

"We did not know you were writing a sermon, sir," said Philip, growing red and uncomfortable; "we did not mean to chase you either. We meant, first of all, to see if a magnifying glass would burn your hair."

"Yes."

"But we could not find one," broke in Grumphie, eagerly, "so we took a glass, just a common glass, you know, and it did beautifully."

"It succeeded very well," said Mr. Craven drily. "Is that all?"

"We have apologised now," said Grumphie; "haven't we?"

"Will you forgive us, please?" asked Essie, anxiously.

"Certainly; on one condition."

"What is the condition?" demanded Philip.

"That in future you try experiments on people who are not as bald as I am. There are three old ladies with splendid hair in the house next mine, and yet you were cruel enough to pick me out. Oh! the thoughtlessness of children! Now, young people, we will drop the subject."

"You are very kind, sir," said Philip; "we thought you would be angry. I am very sorry."

"Right, my lad," said the rector gently; "but you see I was once a boy myself."

"As little as me?" asked Grumphie curiously.

"Yes, and as ungrammatical."

"Grumphie always forgets his me's and I's," put in Essie. "I suppose we had better go now; thank you very much."

"Well, good-bye," said the rector; "next door, remember."

"And now," said Essie, when they got outside, "you two go home, and tell grannie that I will be back in an hour."





CHAPTER VI.

IN THE FISHERMAN'S COTTAGE.

"A minor in the carol."

SO Essie, unconscious of her grandmother's orders, went swiftly away up the sunny street and on to the Esplanade. The sun was so hot there that she had to get as near the sea as possible, for the chance of a fresh breeze, and so at last, walking steadily on, she left the grass and houses behind her, and came upon the fisherman's cottage, standing in dingy relief against the blue sky.

The door was open as usual, but the silence over the place was so unusual and oppressive, that Essie paused for a moment to look in before she entered.

At first she thought that the room was empty, for the sunbeams, creeping in through the diamonded window-panes, lay in golden

shafts straight across the ragged cushions of the empty arm-chair, on which the old man used to sit muttering and mumbling to himself, and on the table where Mrs. M'Dougal had been ironing all the morning ; but when Essie had stepped softly over the broken door-step, she saw a sight that seemed to put a soul into the desolate room, and make it desolate no longer.

Under the tossed patchwork coverlet of the low bed lay little Poll, with her eyes shut, and her feverish lips moaning in a low strange manner. The pillows had slipped on one side, and in their place Tom had placed his strong arm, over which the child's straight brown locks fell heavily. He was kneeling uncomfortably on one knee, looking with tender anxiety at the flushed face of the uneasy sleeper, but when Essie came in, walking laboriously on tiptoe, he raised his head suddenly, and smiled at her.

"You'll excuse me, miss," he said, "but Poll's but just asleep ; would Lady Everard mind your being here ?"

"Oh dear no !" said Essie, in her quick, decisive way. "Grannie likes our coming.

What is the matter with Poll? she was quite well yesterday."

Tom shook his head.

"She's not been well this long time," he said. "Mother's gone for the doctor at last. I'm right glad I came home."

And it suddenly flashed across Essie that perhaps Tom had "give up all" and come home, not so much to bear the daily burden of his old father's dim mind, or his mother's fretfulness, as to love and help tenderly all the unloved atoms in this dreary home—to be the moving power to bring them nearer together into the wide bonds of sympathy.

In a minute she was on her knees beside the bed also, speaking eagerly.

"I am so glad too," she said. "Poll worked so hard, and the baby has got so heavy, and I used to think no one cared; but why have you sent for a doctor? She cannot be as ill as that, and they are not much use anyway."

"Perhaps he will be able to tell us what ails our Polly," said the young man, whispering.

"Oh no, he won't," said Essie; "why, I was ill once—ages ago—and the doctor did

not know nearly as much as I did about myself. I thought I had a pain in my back, but he declared it was in my head, so mother said he knew best, and she made me take all the bottles full of medicine he sent."

"Did your head get better then?" asked Tom.

"Why, there was nothing to *get* better," said Essie—"not in my head at least; and as to my back, it aches sometimes still, and that was four years ago! I do not think much of doctors, Tom, really."

Polly's head turned restlessly over, and her eyes half-opened, then she caught sight of Essie kneeling by her side, and a feeble smile lighted up her whole face.

"Ah, miss dear," she said, in her pretty lingering voice, "I was praying not to die when I fell asleep, and when I saw you there I thought I was in heaven."

"Am I so like an angel?" said Essie, winking away a bright tear. "No, you are not in heaven yet, Polly; you want to live, don't you?" for Essie had a vague and undefined dread of the fatal termination of any illness in which the patient *wished* to die. Death

seemed such a terrible and awful presence, when it stood facing her eager, impetuous life.

"Oh, mother couldn't spare me; could she, Tom?" the child said gently. Tom was telling me, Miss Essie, about every good gift and every perfect gift before I fell asleep, and he said that I might pray to be kept alive, if I liked, because my life was a good gift anyhow, and I must make good use of it."

"I used to teach in Sunday school," said Tom, flushing apologetically, "and I used to tell the boys that, when they wished they were dead."

"Did they often wish it?" said Essie, shocked. "I only did once, when I was on a voyage, you know; it felt so awful."

"But you've never been starved and beaten, miss, you see," said Tom, "with hard work all day, and hard blows and bitter words at night. It's hard for some chaps at times."

"And yet you told them their life was a good gift all the same," said Essie slowly. "Why, what should I do if I grew lame, or silly, or anything? might I not wish to die even then?"

Tom smiled, the rare, sudden smile that brightened and beautified his rough, manly face, and then he said—

“Even then, Miss Essie, it might be a good gift, according to the use you made of it. Pain, and illness, and great sorrow are only other ways of serving God.”

“Thank you,” said Essie frankly. “I will tell grannie that. She said the other day that you must be a good man; and he is good, isn’t he, Poll?”

And the answer in Poll’s gentle eyes, as they met his, softly smiling, was so strange and sweet, that Essie felt it quite hard work to keep back her tears.

“I was talking about doctors,” she said, plunging desperately into conversation, “just before you woke. Is it Dr. Matthews coming to you? he is such a queer man. He does not like you to think that he keeps medicines to sell—to be drunk on the premises, you know—so he pretends that he has just got everything you ask for for himself. I went with Miss Agnew the other day, and when she asked if he could let her have some mustard leaves, he went to a cupboard, and said it was lucky

he had just bought a box for his own use, which he should be pleased to let her have, and I counted ten boxes myself in the cupboard. He must be *very* ill if he needs to buy mustard leaves wholesale."

"He wears a gold chain," said Poll faintly, "and he makes his own medicines."

"I remember him when he was only a doctor's boy," said Tom, with his eyes twinkling, "and he was turned away because he invented what he called the 'Ink Cure,' and used to give doses of ink to his master's patients as an experiment. There was a great fuss about it at the time, and I remember he cried a great deal, and said as how genius had no chance in Milford, and he talked a deal of rubbish about Sir Isaac Newton, and folks like him; and here he is settled quietly down, and no doctor in the country-side that folks has more faith in."

"Is he a genius, then?" asked Essie, with wide-open eyes.

"He's a clever man and a practical," said Tom, "and the 'Ink Cure' has died out, though I *do* hear as he's still a great one for experiments."

"He must not experiment on Poll," said Essie, laughing. "There's some one at the door; do you think he has come?"

Poll raised herself, flushed and excited, from Tom's arm, as Essie rose to her feet and faced the door—faced also a tall, slight, pretty young woman, who stood blankly staring on the threshold.

"Why, Miss Agnew!" she cried; "is that you? I am so glad! Do you know that Poll is ill?"

"I know," said Miss Agnew; "I have been down before, this morning. Essie, you should not be here."

She spoke in such a cold, constrained tone, that Essie was startled, and began a hasty explanation.

"I have done her no harm indeed," she said. "I have not talked very much or very loud—have I, Tom? I think she really seems better."

"I should not have let Miss Essie stay," said Tom, speaking for the first time, "only she said Lady Everard did not mind, and you know more of illness than I do."

"Grandmamma did not know," said truthful

Essie. "I came on straight from Mr. Craven's. Did you not want me to come, Miss Agnew? I am so sorry."

"Never mind now," said Miss Agnew gently, trying to smile away the miserable fear that clung to her heart, as she looked at Polly's sunken eyes and flushing cheeks. "Your grandmother did not wish you to come here certainly until after the doctor had been, but we will hope no harm is done. Cheer up, Essie! when we hear the doctor's verdict, you shall come and see Poll again. It may be only a feverish cold."

But when she had reached home, she went straight up to Lady Everard's room, and said, "Little Polly has scarlet fever, dear Lady Everard, I am certain, and when I came upon them, Essie was kneeling by her side, and stooping over her, so as to hear her voice."

Lady Everard was never querulous—never excited. She grew a little whiter, perhaps, but then her troublesome charge had blanched that sweet face so many times in these four years, and she said—"My poor Essie. Keep her away from the others to-night, and to-morrow we will see."

And Essie, learning her lessons in the schoolroom, with her fingers in her ears, reciting "Edinburgh after Flodden" aloud, thought it very odd that grandmamma should interrupt her studies to tell her to sleep alone in the spare room.





CHAPTER VII.

AT THE VILLA.

"Ill which He blesses."

THEY *did* see, as grandmamma had said ; for before the fortnight was out, the children had to be sent away, the house toned down to quietness, while Essie lay restlessly on the spare-room bed, in the first uneasy stages of scarlet fever. It was a slight attack, the doctor said, and the most unpleasant part was the sore throat, and then he turned to Lady Everard, and told her of little Poll, lying delirious on her uncomfortable bed in her miserable home. "If it were not for Tom," he said, "I do not know what we should do."

And Essie turned away suddenly, with her ice and oranges and dainties beside her, and cried for little Polly as she never cried for any pain of her own ; and day by day word went

down from the villa to the fisherman's cottage that Miss Essie was doing nicely, and had sent down some ice, and every evening Tom tramped up to the back door of the villa to say that Polly was raving still, or was "quieter like," and she thanked Miss Essie for her kind thought.

Polly was much the worst, there was no doubt of that. While Essie was lying quietly in bed, reading the pretty books with which Lady Everard kept her supplied, Polly was still tossing from side to side of her hot pillows, moaning querulously, or rambling on in a thick unsteady voice about the baby, and Jim, and her mother, until a day came when, out of the confusion of her brain, she seemed to grasp something tangible at last, when the fever left her suddenly, and her mother cried over her washing, and Tom sat for three hours quite still with his arm under her head, and the doctor's voice faltered when he tried to speak cheerily of the future.

Then there came a long pause. For days she seemed to lie in a delicious rest, such as she had never known before in all her busy life ; in which the children's voices and her mother's

fretful tones blended into a kind of lullaby. She forgot that the mattress was hard, the pillows rough, the cottage draughty ; she only rested, and then, too soon, she turned from that peace to the fretfulness and noise of her everyday life, and took up her burden again, just where she had laid it down—but things were never quite as hard after that, for when she rose weakly from her bed, she found that she was on the threshold of a new life, of whose door Lady Everard held the key.

She went up to see Essie directly she could walk so far, and found her propped up with pillows, a little pale perhaps, but smiling—with her hands folded in front of her idly.

"I am so glad," she said, when Polly had seated herself on the very edge of the comfortable arm-chair. "I like seeing you here, Polly, you have been so ill, ever so much worse than I was, but you are up first after all."

"What ails you, Miss Essie?" said Poll, with gentle sympathy.

"My back, I think," said Essie, flushing ; "sometimes I think it will never get well ; only, Polly, I could not bear that, could I?"

"To be a cripple?" queried Polly slowly.

"To lose my good gift," said Essie, laughing softly.

"Only it would not be *losing* exactly," said Poll, leaning forward and speaking earnestly ; "leastways Tom says not, and he always knows."

"Well, I will wait and see," said Essie ; "and, in the meantime, amuse me." With a quick imperious wave of her white, thin hand, on which the veins stood out blue and distinct, "Wait a minute, I want first to show you a letter from Chris."

"Where are they all?" asked Poll, realising the intense quiet of the house for the first time.

"Over in France, with Miss Agnew," said Essie.

"France!" cried Polly, "really France! "where they cut off folk's heads, and where they are heathens. Oh, surely not, Miss Essie."

Essie laughed. "But they needn't get heathens, Poll," she said ; "and, besides, they are just as good as we are—not heathens a bit, and no one cuts off anyone's heads now, except for murder. . Why, grandmamma lived in France nearly all her life, and it's just lovely. To-morrow, when you come again, I'll get her

to tell us a story about it. Grandmamma's stories are splendid. I'll call her now—or, at least, we'll read Chrissie's letter first."

There was not much news in Chrissie's letter; its chief peculiarity lay in the grammar and spelling, but it had taken the child a long morning to write, and Essie quite appreciated the honour of its receipt.

"MY DEAR ESSIE,

"We had such a lovely crossing, it was hardly rough a-tall. I miss you so much. I hope I will soon see you again. The lilac is only just out here. France is awfully hot, and Philip is awfully dull. We went to a tea party last night. Grumphy would have eaten everything, only I pinched him. When we were going upstairs he said to himself, 'I could have crammed in one peace more.' Phil found three little kittens. They were only born yesterday. Grumphy doesn't like Miss Agnew much. She gives us no jam, only just quite common meat. We send our love to you and grandmamma, and I remain,

"Yr affectionate sister,

"CHRISSIE CHESTER."

"Grumphy's quite young," observed Essie, as she folded up the letter, "else he's very greedy."

"I think most people are greedy," said Poll sagely, "when they can get what they want. I'm terribly greedy about cake."

"Then we'll have some up presently," said Essie promptly. "Grandmamma says I am to have everything I have a fancy for, so I just fancy hard all day long, and if I could get up—if I could, Poll, I should be so happy. Polly," leaning forward suddenly, with a shining in her eyes, "tell me truly—on your word of honour—do you think I shall ever walk about any more?"

Polly laid her head down upon the white coverlid at the foot of the bed and sobbed.

"Don't name such things, miss, dear," she said; "how can I tell? You'll be weakly perhaps, but you'll walk again, surely."

"Not be a cripple?" persisted Essie, wistfully.

"No, please God, not," said Polly.

"Thank you," said Essie, reassured and comforted; "then I must 'bide my time,' as nurse said, and if you will just go to the

drawing-room and fetch grandmamma, I will be very glad ; only kiss me, Poll."

For a minute the two heads lay close together on the pillow, and when Polly lifted hers and turned away, her white cheeks were wet with tears, whilst Essie's great eyes were smiling brightly.

But when the door was shut, the smile died out in a sudden darkness, and Essie, clasping her hands close together, cried out in her young tired voice, as though she were speaking to some visible presence, "Only not a cripple—not a cripple ; anything but that."

Grandmamma, coming softly in with Polly, and stooping to stroke the face upon the pillow, said, "Always the same, my brave little girl ; always patient, always cheerful, always smiling." And at the words and touch Essie's smile brightened and deepened, and her cheeks flushed, until Polly, standing by, wondered what was the strange new beauty on Miss Essie's face.

"So I am to tell you a story, am I?" said Lady Everard, placidly taking up her knitting, and sitting at the foot of the bed, in the clear warm sunshine ; "only first I have a word to

say to Polly here. How would she like, do you think, Essie, to leave Milford with us, and be your little maid, whilst you are weak, my darling? to work for you, and be with you always, and get a little help with her books between whiles? Would that suit you, Polly?"

"Oh, my lady!" breathed Polly. "It's too good, if mother could spare me."

"You see there's Annie growing up," said Essie eagerly; "she's ten, I know, and you said yourself that she was handy."

"So she is, at times," said Polly, doubtfully, "but I left her, when I came here, crying over the milk jug that she'd broken."

"But people must learn," said Essie.

"Oh! she's learning fast," answered Polly. "You see, my lady, it's just because I want to come to you so much that I can't think right. Tom will know."

"Do you ask Tom everything?" said Essie, with the faintest wonder in her tone—wonder as to how it might have been with her if Phil had been something more like Tom, a brother whom she could have trusted and consulted, rather than one whom she had to shield and encourage.

She gave a faint sigh, while Polly, raising her head, said, with a flush upon her cheeks—

“I tell him everything, Miss Essie, because



he knows so well ; he goes straight to the point always, does Tom. Now *I* can't make up my

mind as to whether I might go with you, or whether I ought to stay and help mother and the children—but Tom! why, I don't believe Tom waited a minute when he got our letter, though he was getting on so well and everything. I believe he only said to himself, 'Mother is my first duty,' and he just gave up everything."

"Well, ask your mother," said Lady Everard, lifting her quiet face in the direction of Polly's eager voice, "and, in the meantime, are you ready for a story?"

"Quite ready," said Essie, laying her small dark head back wearily on the pillow, "and so is Poll."





CHAPTER VIII.

"NOBLESSE OBLIGE."

"Love, give me strength ! and strength shall help afford."

"TELL us about grandpapa," suggested Essie, as Lady Everard sat silent, with her knitting on her lap. "I always like to hear about him."

"Do you ?" said Lady Everard, starting from her reverie, and smiling softly to herself. "He died, you know, fifty years ago, aged 37—he is buried in Père-la-Chaise. You, Essie, have seen his grave. Shall I tell Polly what it is like ? There is a white marble cross, with the Angel of Resurrection standing against it, with folded hands, looking up to the sky that is so blue in Paris, and round his feet is written the name and date, and the text, 'There shall be no more sea.'"

"And the rose, grandmamma—the rose !" said Essie.

"There is a marble rose," said Lady Everard, "half hidden under the ivy now, that I put there for my own pleasure, because, dear children, of the time I first saw him in the avenue of roses, and because of his happy life, that he used to say was all 'couleur de rose.'"

"Tell us about the first time you saw him," said Essie.

"It was a summer's day," said Lady Everard, dreamily, "and my mother was paying a visit to Sir Vincent Everard in his grand country house, outside Paris. He was a naturalised Frenchman then, and they all spoke French only, as we did, and he and my mother sat talking in low tones in the white and gold chairs of the great drawing-room, until I was weary of watching our three faces reflected in the tall mirrors; so I got up quietly, and slipped out into the garden, among the roses.

"There was a fountain, I remember, and some gold-fish, and as I dabbled my hands in the water, I sang a bright little French song to myself, and dropped in the rose leaves to its tune, watching them drawn into the little whirlpool where the spray splashed down.

"Suddenly a voice as young as mine, and far

sweeter, took up the words, and went on softly to the end of the verse, while I paused, and turned.

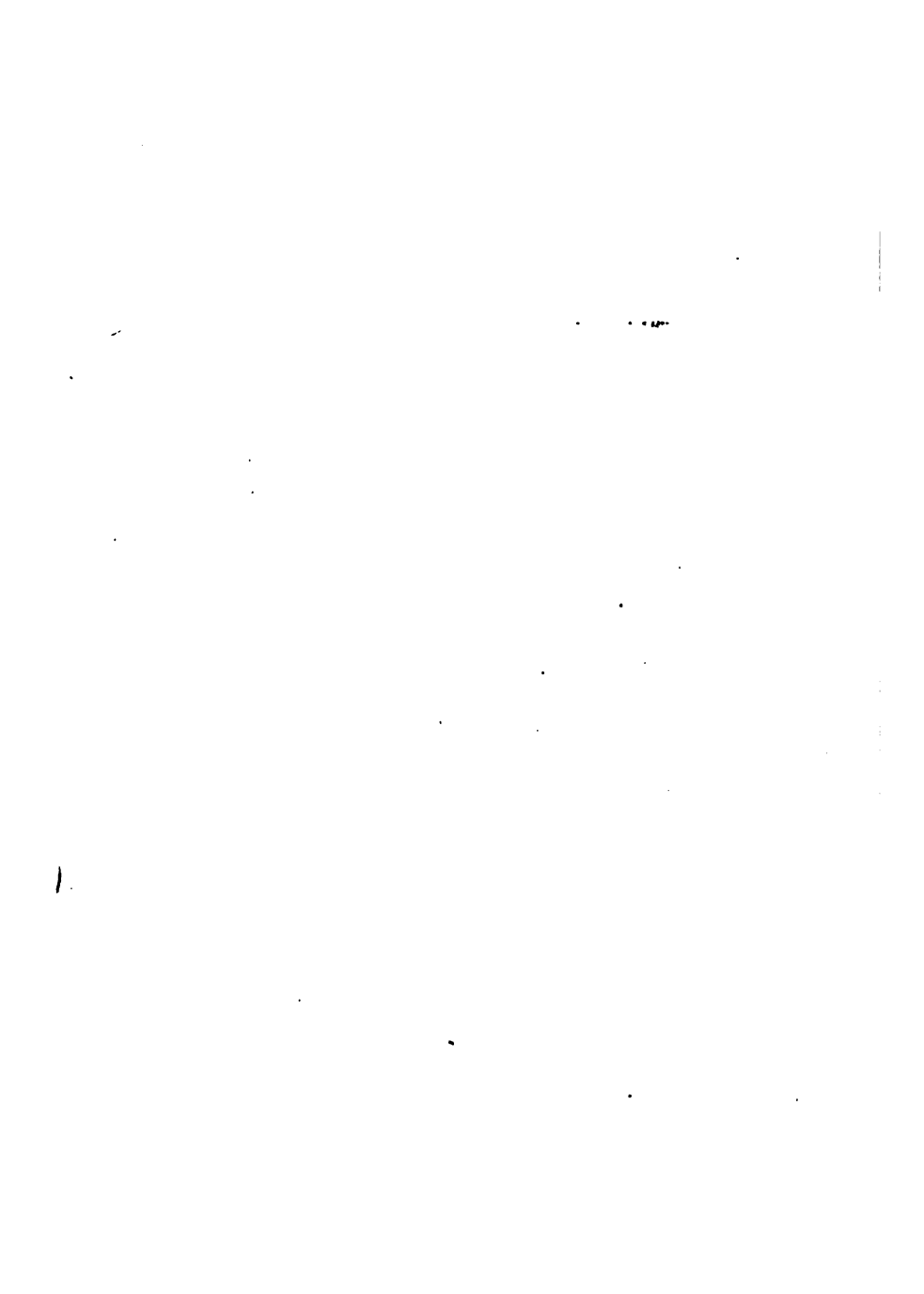
“Just at the entrance to the avenue he was standing, laughing at me—dressed in his fine clothes, with powdered hair and buckled shoes, and in his fingers he was twirling a rose. So I saw him, children, for the first time.

“I cried out angrily to him, ‘Is it so, Monsieur, that you mock yourself of a young lady whom you do not know?’ and then he ceased smiling, and came forward. ‘Tenez,’ he said; ‘how shall I make my apology? I go away, leaving the garden desolate—a wilderness—the roses blooming in beauty for me and for my father only; and, in an hour, I come back to find the garden desolate no longer—to find a fairer rose,’ and he bowed very low, ‘than any growing on a bush, bending over the fountain, and seeing its reflected beauty in the unflattering water.’

“Of course it was a foolish compliment, my dears, that meant nothing; but your grandfather always had such charming manners. Then he gave me the rose he held, and I pinned it into the front of my blue dress, and



THE END OF THE WORLD



thought it was the loveliest flower that ever grew."

"I hope you kept it better than you did the egg, grandmamma?" said Essie; "or else it was hardly worth while people giving you things."

"Look!" said Lady Everard. "Can you reach my watch, Polly? Touch the spring, and let Essie see."

And there, inside the gold cover, lay a little heap of faded leaves, whose last faint smell had died out long ago.

"That is the rose," said grandmamma; "the watch he gave me two years afterwards, when we were married, Can you read the inscription? 'Pour y parvenir, 1792.' His grandmother sent it to England for him the day she was guillotined."

"Then he *was* a little French," said Essie, "after all."

"He was *quite* French on his mother's side," said Lady Everard. "Sir Vincent was studying in Paris when he met Mdle. de Ste. Etienne, and fell in love with her, and married her. When the Revolution broke out, they fled to his English home, with the baby—my Vincent

—but old Madame la Baronne stayed to face the fury of the mob. ‘Noblesse oblige,’ she said, and so she waited.”

“For what?” said Essie, breathlessly, moved, as she always was, by grannie’s revolutionary tales.

“Why, Essie, you know all the story by heart,” said Lady Everard, turning her darkened eyes again towards the bed from whence came the eager voice. “And Polly here might be frightened—it is such a sad story.”

“But Polly *particularly wishes* to hear of people being beheaded,” interposed Essie; “and we both like sad stories; and if they get too sad, grannie, why, you know, we can always go to sleep.”

“That is a good idea,” said grannie, smiling; “and I like my own old stories too—they take me back so many years—to my dear husband, and his love for me, and the sunny garden, and the roses; and to think,” went on grandmamma, softly, “that the story ended so long ago, in a marble cross over a green grave in Père-la-Chaise! and my name will look so strange by his—my seventy-five years such a lifetime beyond his thirty-seven!”

"But Madame la Baronne, grannie," said Essie, with gentle reminder.

"I was dreaming again," said Lady Everard. "Well! Madame la Baronne, and her daughter, and Sir Vincent, and the boy, were all sitting one evening, in the dark, in the gold and white drawing-room, whispering together of many things. Sir Vincent was leaning on the table, and his young wife was on the ground at his feet, with her face hidden on his knee, while the boy lay sleeping on the skirt of his grandmother's dress—for the Revolution had begun—the servants they had cared for had turned and cursed them—the house they loved, the nation they had served, the country they had lived for, were falling in ruins at their feet.

"Lady Everard was crushed and helpless—clinging to her husband and her little boy, as her sole hope in life. Sir Vincent was stricken to the heart for her. But out of the desolation, and misery, and fear, Madame la Baronne raised her proud old head in simple courage, and brought all the aristocratic prejudices and traditions of centuries down to the level of the Revolution. She was a beautiful woman—beautiful, I believe, even in that moment of

extremest fear, when she rose, white, cold, proud, and stood listening.

“She heard, what neither of the others had heard, a faint, impatient knocking at the outer door. Then listening intently, she fancied she caught the sound of clamorous voices and the distant shuffle of roughly-shod feet. ‘I hear *Julienne*,’ she said; ‘wait for me here’—then she opened the door, went out into the passage, down the long corridor, into the entrance hall beyond, and paused. The lamp swinging above her lighted up the great empty space, with its white pillars, the tessellated pavement, the dark oak furniture—the thirty fierce, rough faces also, that seemed closing round her like a nightmare.

“The foremost face was not three feet from hers, and the owner of it put a rude, unwashed hand upon her muslin kerchief.

“Then she moved, and called back over her shoulder to her man-servant, who was waiting by the door.

“‘*Jean*,’ she said; show these gentlemen into the library, if they wish to see me on business.’

“‘Sir,’ to the man who barred her way, ‘permit me to enter first.’

"The man dropped the hand he had stretched across the doorway, sullenly, as she swept past him. Then she unpinned the kerchief he had soiled with his touch, and laid it on the fire. As the last spark fluttered away, the tumult grew loud and fierce.

" 'We wish to see Citoyen Vincent Everard,' the spokesman said.

" 'My son-in-law is in England,' Madame la Baronne answered.

" 'That is a lie,' he shouted.

" Madame kept silence, but her heart beat fast under her satin bodice.

" 'Then the citoyenne will do as well,' said a sullen voice in the background, while a dark young man jumped upon one of the crimson chairs, and circled his short thick neck with his dirty hands. 'The citoyenne has a neck—and the neck of an aristocrate is all that the nation demands.'

" For a minute Madame was silent—then she spoke. 'My head, my life, my property belong to France,' she said; 'Vive le Roi!' She stood erect, smiling, through all the tumult her words caused; when it had subsided, she spoke again.

“‘I give my body to you,’ she said, with an agony of pleading in every line of her old sweet face. ‘My soul you cannot touch. I will give every one of you 100 louis if you will permit me to go alone through the hall, into the room I have just left. Let me have five minutes for prayer, since I have no confessor, and I have named your reward—if not,’ and with a sudden, swift movement she drew a pistol from her pocket, and held it up before them all, ‘I shoot the first man who touches me dead.’

“There was a moment’s silence. The greed for money was very strong—the thirst for blood stronger. Sir Vincent Everard had escaped, but Madame de Ste. Etienne—an aristocrate to the tips of her white fingers—a woman—an heiress—was a far worthier prize; they drew back instinctively, and looked towards the sullen, black-eyed man who was still peering at the straight proud figure from one of her crimson chairs.

“His eyes glittered, and his lips parted in a laugh. ‘Let the citoyenne keep her word,’ he said, ‘and we will give her five minutes.’ There was a crash and shiver of glass, as the pistol

flashed out into the moonlit garden—a dull thud as a silk purse fell at the feet of the speaker—the swift opening and shutting of the oaken door, and Madame de Ste. Etienne was gone."

"Go on," said Essie, as Lady Everard paused; "and in the other room?"

"In the other room," said grandmamma, with a long breath, "Sir Vincent was still sitting by the table reading—Lady Everard was still resting her head upon his shoulder—the child was still sleeping.

"Madame la Baronne sank into a chair, breathing hard and fast.

"‘I have faced the Revolutionists,’ she said, ‘for the first time, and I come back victorious. Look at me.’

"They looked at her, wondering. Sir Vincent had risen to his feet, and stood before her. ‘Mother,’ he said, calling her by the rare sweet name that he had never known a mother of his own to give to, ‘why did you go alone, and say nothing?’

"‘Never mind! it is over now,’ she said, still smiling, although she was white as death. ‘Now obey me! It is *you* they want!

Me? I am nothing to them—only a helpless, foolish old woman. I am safe enough! You must take these passports, that I have kept for you so long, and get to England somehow—we have friends everywhere, as yet, but darker days are coming.'

" 'I will not go,' he answered.

" 'Yes, you will,' she said gently, 'to save us all. Go at once, from the window here, out into the wood. Shake the powder from your hair—stain your hands—tear up your lace ruffles—but keep your money and the jewels you have until we meet again.'

" 'And my wife?' he said.

" 'She goes with you,' said Madame, smiling her brave sweet smile into the frightened young eyes, 'and the boy too. Go now, at once, whilst I watch you. God bless you, my darlings.' She drew up the window softly, and looked out. On this side of the house everything was still and quiet, and the wood lay bathed in moonlight, a hundred yards away. She kissed her daughter, and wrapped a shawl about her and the heavy boy, and watched them go. Then she faced Sir Vincent.

" 'Do you swear to me,' he said, pausing for

a second, with her two white hands in his, and stooping to look into her eyes, 'that I am saving you by this—that danger only threatens you through me?'

" 'I swear it,' she said.

" 'Then good-bye,' he answered huskily; 'I would die for you and her.'

" And Madame, closing the window softly, said to herself, 'That gives them one more chance of life.'

" Then she threw open the door, and faced the thirty rough, drunken faces again—and she said, 'I thank you, gentlemen; I have said my prayers.'"

" Ah," said Polly, "it is beautiful—is there more to tell?"

" Another time," said Lady Everard. "I hear the tea-bell just now. Essie, are you happy?"

" Miss Essie don't heed you, my lady," said Polly, shyly; "she's fallen asleep."



CHAPTER IX.

THE EBB OF THE TIDE.

"To the brave, all homage render."

FESSIE got well very slowly ; even when the time came for them to leave Milford, and return to their own pleasant home in Staffordshire, she was hardly strong enough to move from room to room, and spent most of her time in the great arm-chair by the drawing-room window.

She grew accustomed to her life too, it seemed to come upon her so gradually ; she had almost forgotten the time when she could not quiet her footsteps to a walk—when her eager voice had been first everywhere ; and though she said now and then, looking in the glass, "I wonder what Nurse will think of my pale cheeks?" still she said it laughing, and forgot to wonder five minutes afterwards.

"And so we are really going to-morrow?" she said to Polly one day, as they two sat in the bow-window. "I should be most miserable, Polly, about leaving the sea, and the people, and everything, if grandmamma had not pro-



mised that we might come back next year—and I have you," she went on brightly, "as a sort of souvenir—a trifle from Milford."

"And Tom's going along wi' me, in a kind of way," said Polly. "Ashtown, that's close by

Silverdale, where he was working—leastways not seven miles off.”

“Is it *really*?” cried Essie, quite excited. “Oh! he’s in the next room cording the boxes—call him in, Polly, and let him tell me.”

But Essie was destined never to have that desire gratified, for at that minute there came the sound of many feet trampling up between the long grass of the villa lawn, and in an instant the two children had thrown themselves to the window, and were hanging breathlessly out.

“It is Mr. Craven,” cried Essie, “and heaps of people! What *can* they want—they look so tired, and hot, and wet. Oh! and there’s Martin and Jim, quite in the middle of the excitement!”

“It is something about *Jim*,” said Polly, in such a quiet voice, that it stilled Essie, like a hand laid suddenly on her lips. “Look at him!”

Essie looked.

The boy was walking close to Mr. Craven, in the very midst of the clamouring, rough, noisy crowd. His cap was gone, and his thick hair was wet and straight. All the clothes he had

on—for he had divested himself of his jacket—were drenched and dripping, and his feet were bare.

But Essie looked beyond his uncomfortable garments and stumbling feet. She looked at the face, that had caught sight of her and Poll at that upper window, and was lifted white and smiling.

“Tom!” cried Essie, hurrying to the door. “Go down and tell us what has happened, or I shall *die* with excitement.”

Before the words were out of her mouth, Tom was downstairs, and out of the hall door, in the middle of the agitated group upon the lawn, while Essie was kneeling by the window-seat again, leaning as far out as was compatible with safety.

“Polly,” she said; “listen!”

Polly, white as death, was beside her, and in answer to the words she leant out also, trying to still her trembling, and the chattering of her teeth.

“Why, you silly child,” said Essie, with a superior smile, “there’s nothing wrong with him.”

“He’s been in the sea, Miss Essie,” said the

child, still in that quiet, repressed voice. "I see he has."

"But he has got out again," said Essie, gently.

"And that is more than some people do. Look again! Mr. Craven is speaking."

Mr. Craven had moved forward to the doorstep, and had taken off his hat. He was speaking low and earnestly to some one standing there, who answered him in slow monosyllables. It was Lady Everard, who had come out at the sound of the clamorous voices, and was standing in the bright sunshine, with her patient, pathetic face turned outwards.

Mr. Craven, leaning forward, so that his handsome face looked down upon her darkened eyes, spoke in quick, low words, pointing back over his shoulder to the group behind—then he stood on one side, and the men divided right and left, as Lady Everard suddenly left her isolated place, and passed down amongst them.

"That is good, Jim," the children, listening above, heard her say, and then she put out her hand and touched his shoulder.

"Why, he is dripping?" she said, horrified; "and he has been standing here at least five minutes. Go in doors directly."

Jim shuffled uncomfortably, and stood on one leg like a stork, rubbing his wet foot up and down, until Tom came to the rescue.

"I'll take him home, my lady," he said. "Thank you kindly."

But Lady Everard was determined.

"Put him to bed here," she said, and get his things dried. I will see about his getting something hot."

She turned to go, but the men who had gathered round her cheered as she passed up amongst them, until she stood white, erect, and quiet on the doorstep again. Then they turned their attention to Jim, and their ringing voices followed him also as he went limping up the pathway, holding on to Tom's arm.

Lady Everard came straight up to the children's room, and found Essie, flushed and excited, on the threshold.

"What is it, grannie?" she cried. "What has Jim been doing?"

"Jim shall tell you himself by-and-by," said Lady Everard, with her sweet smile.

"That is better than getting the story second-hand. I should only spoil it, I am afraid, for everybody told it to me at once, and I really cannot remember who fell into the sea first, and who dragged who out, or who fainted. Why, Polly, I did not hear a sob, did I! The boy is quite safe, dear child."

"We are both crying," said Essie, winking her eyes hard; "but we feel better on the whole; only you will promise, dear grannie, to let Jim come up and tell us everything this evening. Will you not?"

"Directly he is out of his wet clothes, certainly," said Lady Everard.

So, in the evening, when all the confusion had subsided—when Tom had gone back home to his mother, and the early villagers were thinking of bed, Jim, warmed and dried and fed, came up to the schoolroom to tell his story.

He stood shyly in the doorway, just as he had stood that other evening when first he came to the villa, until Essie, who was lying on the sofa, with Polly working beside her, raised herself, and called out quickly—"Come in, Jim! we have been waiting for you for hours."

Jim touched the loose lock of red hair, in the place where a cap might have been, and came awkwardly in to the cheerful room, until he was face to face with Essie's eager eyes, that danced and sparkled with excitement. His feet were bare, as usual, and he walked carefully, as though afraid to soil the soft carpet, to which he was so unused.

"I've nought to tell, Miss Essie," he said, with an appealing glance at Polly's quiet face. "I don't know what all the fuss is about—I could swim, and she couldn't."

"But tell us about it," said Essie. "Who was she? What was she doing? How did you first notice her?"

"I were mending the nets," said Jim, "right in front of the cottage, and talking to father between whiles, when all on a sudden I heard a scream, and there was a woman running down to the edge of the water, pointing far out to sea. I put down the nets, and stood up, but at first I saw nothing, Miss Esther, for the sunshine was strong in my eyes. But the woman was still pointing, still crying, and when she saw me she clasped her hands, and came

stumbling and falling over the rocks up to where I was standing.

"I left the nets then, Miss Essie, of course, and ran down to the water's edge, and when I shaded my eyes, I saw a little black speck bobbing up and down on the waves, a good seventy yards out. I thought it were a gull at first, only for the woman; but when she cried out that it was a girl, I threw my coat off and went. I swim, you see."

"How about the tide?" said Essie.

"That was just the danger, you see," answered the lad. "The tide going out, and a storm coming on, so that I could hardly get along at all—I was afraid, mortal afraid of the rocks—but it did not look such a very bad job, leastways from the shore, and the woman cried so."

"Well?" said Poll, breathlessly.

"Well," echoed Jim. "It seemed a long way, once I was in the water, but I wasn't going to be beaten then, and, besides, I could see the face by that time—quite a young lady—she had drifted out, floating, and she was lying quite still, with her eyes shut. She did not hear me at all, you see, and even when I got

near, I was afraid to speak for fear of startling her—because if she had struggled, we should both have been lost.”

“Go on,” said Essie ; “what did you say ?”

“I just said, as quietly as I could, ‘Lie still—you are safe now.’” Jim paused.

“Well ?” said the children, in a breath.

“She never moved a muscle,” said Jim, with a suspicious clearing of his throat. “But her face flushed up scarlet all over, and then she opened her eyes—great, frightened eyes that went through me. Ah ! Miss Esther, it was like a dead person coming back to life.”

“It must have felt like that to her,” said Essie softly. “Jim, I was looking at the sea rushing against the rocks, and leaving that long white line of surf, all this afternoon. I thought it was very grand and beautiful, but it must have seemed terribly cruel to you, who were fighting with it.”

“It was just a fight,” he said, his eyes flashing, his lips quivering, “all the way home. I swam with one hand, and guided her with the other, but the waves ran high, and the sun stared down on us, until the whole sea seemed to be little quivers of light. She kept her

eyes wide open, and there was a look in them that was terrible, Miss Essie—terrible—so I just turned away and worked on ; and then, all of a sudden, I couldn't see her any more, and I seemed to hear songs in my ears, and I thought there were weights on my legs dragging me down, and I felt sleepy.

“ I tried to push on—I did indeed—but when I found I could not, I said to her, ‘ Shut your eyes,’ because I thought it would be less horrible for her, you see ; then I threw up my hands, and cried—and I seemed to go down, down, down, into the shadow of death.”

“ Oh, horrible !” said Essie. “ Never mind, Poll ; he is safe, you see.”

“ And after that ?” said Poll, her white lips framing the words with difficulty.

“ After that ? why, after that, there was only the coming-to again, to find myself lying on the stones, a good 100 yards down the beach, with a crowd round me, and mother rubbing my hands and crying. I was afraid to ask for the young lady at first, because I thought she must have died ; but I staggered up on to my feet, and the fellows stood back and made a path for me to walk down, and there was my

young lady lying on the sand, just a little bruised by the rocks, and she had fainted. That is all."

"And is all that really about you, Jim?" said Essie, leaning forward, and touching the hand that hung at his side—"just the same Jim we have played with on the beach, you know! He has got ever so far ahead of us now—hasn't he, Polly?"

Jim flushed to a deeper crimson, even through his sunburn. "It was nothing," he said. "Don't you see, Miss Essie, it was just the one thing I could do. There's heaps of other things you could do better. It's just the chances."

"But the chances don't come to everyone," said Essie. "And everyone does not know how to use them when they do. No, Jim; whatever you say, it is a grand thing to have done, and we are proud of you."

"That's the best part, Miss Essie," said Jim, laughing shyly. "That's worth even the chance of the rocks, and being knocked to pieces—nearly."

"It is better as it is," said Polly, looking up with her wistful, old-fashioned glance. "We need the boys so much, Miss Essie. I don't know what mother would do without them."



CHAPTER X.

FAREWELLS.

"And some have greatness thrust upon them."

THE last morning at Milford came a great deal too soon for Essie, and with it the storm that had been gathering all the previous day. She woke to the vision of furious white-crested waves breaking against the rocks and pier, and driving the little fishing boats into the safe anchorage of the sheltered harbour, and her thoughts wandered instantaneously to Jim's adventure of the day before, as she wondered if he could by any possibility have saved that life against such accumulated fury as this.

Jim himself was up at the villa—bright, strong, active—by ten o'clock, and stood shyly at the door of the sitting-room, answering Essie's eager questions—only once volunteer-

ing any information of his own, when he told her, with a flush of pride, that Mr. Craven was going to write about a medal.

"Oh, I *am* glad!" she said. "Oh! grannie," as Lady Everard came into the room from her superintendence of the last arrangements, "did you hear that? You must ask Mr. Craven to let us know if Jim gets a medal."

"Of course I will, my dear, if you wish it," said grannie. "Next year, I hope you may see it for yourself;" and then Lady Everard, suddenly fearful of the making of sandwiches and packing of hampers without her sustaining presence, drifted out into the hall again, leaving Essie alone.

Tom went down to the station with them to see after the luggage—this being too stormy a day to allow of work on the great deep. Jim carried the little aquarium safely, that Essie was taking home as a surprise for the children. Mr. Craven said that he must see them off, and be sure that the cushions were arranged in the most comfortable manner for Essie's convenience. So they made quite a large group upon the platform, when the train came slowly in.

The aquarium was perched in threatening proximity to Polly's erect head, with all the little anemones cowering timidly under their slimy stones ; and Essie leant forward for a last farewell to the brothers, while Lady Everard listened to Mr. Craven's good-humoured bantering prognostications.

Suddenly there appeared on the platform two strange ladies, and strangers being rare at Milford, people looked curiously after them, as they hurried down the train, looking for seats. One was a middle-aged woman, who talked in a shrill high voice, in broken English, of the accidents which had delayed them until the last minute—of the impossibility of disposing of luggage safely in England—of the inconvenience of travelling at all ; the other, at whom Essie looked with frank admiration in her face, was a girl of about sixteen, in deep mourning. She was tall, and slight, and quiet, with short curled hair, and a finely cut clever face, on which an amused smile was hovering. As the French lady panted on beside the guard, far in advance, the girl stopped suddenly, with her hand on the door of the carriage where Essie was seated, and said in a clear low voice

in French, "Mademoiselle, do not annoy yourself then any more. I have found sufficient room."

Essie drew back her head as the porter swung open the door, and the girl stepped in, followed by her hot and exhausted governess—then she looked across Polly at Jim, and smiled a slow, surprised smile, that made the expression of her face beautiful.

"See!" she said, touching Mademoiselle's arm.

"But what is there to see, then?" grumbled Mademoiselle. "I have seen too much of stations lately—there is no rest anywhere."

The girl leant past her, and touched Jim's sleeve, as he stood by the window—"Another chance," she said, "of thanking you."

Jim started and stared at the sweet, smiling face, bending towards him, while a sudden blush reddened his cheek at some remembrance that flashed on him at sight of those large, earnest, beautiful eyes; but, before he had time to answer, the train began to whistle and snort spasmodically, the bell rang. Polly's eyes filled with tears, as she clutched Tom's hand. Jim grinned more and more to hide a certain dim-

ness of sight that he considered womanly, while Tom lifted his cap, taking in Lady Everard and her grand-daughter in his bow—and said, “God bless you, my lady ; we shall look for you next year, missie.”

“Tom was right, my Esther,” said grannie, quietly, from her corner. “Next year *you* will come back to the anemones, and the boats, and the fishing, but God alone knows where I shall be.”

“I couldn’t spare you, grandmamma,” said Essie, kissing her with vehement passion.

“God knows best, my darling,” said Lady Everard.

“He knows what is best too for us, my lady,” said Polly, gently—“and perhaps that’s to keep you a while longer.”

“Oh, I *hope* so !” said Essie.

“I demand pardon,” broke in the French lady, who was beginning to recover from the exertion and consequent fatigue ; “but do we change much in penetrating to London ?”

“Only once,” answered Lady Everard, “at Stafford, where we leave you ; but there are three stoppages.”

“Will you tell me,” said the young girl,

turning her sweet face to Essie, "if you know Milford well?"

"We just come in the summer," said Essie. "I am afraid you will not care to come again, will you?"

"Why not?" said the girl, puzzled. "Oh! I see you know about my foolish share in the excitement yesterday. I can't bear to think of it quite yet. At any rate, Milford has one hero."

"This is his sister," said Essie, drawing attention to Poll's delighted face. "He is a splendid boy, is he not? We have known him a long time; he gets our sea anemones for us at low tide, and shrimps—but he hates fishing."

"Tell me," said the girl, suddenly bending across to Polly, and speaking low; "do you think he would like better to go out to service? Would he come abroad with us this winter, do you think, as page? We are going to Dresden, and I have been lying awake half the night wondering what way I could help him best; and if he does not like fishing—why, that is a change, at all events."

"Do not make thy arrangements, imprudent one," said Mademoiselle, frowning, "until thou

hast been once more clasped in the arms of thy mother. Ah! madame," turning to Lady Everard, with a fine gesture, that was lost on those darkened eyes, "picture to yourself the scene yesterday—the raging sea—the waves like mountains—my pupil drifted out before my eyes. I scream, I cry, I rage upon the sand—while she, heroic one, lies calmly, waiting her death."

"Hush!" said the girl, imperiously. "Don't talk of my heroism in face of that grand deed which you are forgetting. What could I do but lie still?—this child's brother here must have all the praise."

Essie shrank back, quiet and thoughtful. "What could I do but lie still," the girl had said—almost the same words that Jim had made use of in speaking of his part. What was heroism, after all, she wondered. Was it only doing one's duty at any cost—as a duty. If so, perhaps the "lying still" had been as much a heroism in this girl as fighting the elements had been in Jim. It seemed an illustration of Essie's favourite line—"They also serve who only stand and wait."

"I think you were both heroes," she said in

her quick, impetuous way. "It must have been so hard not to have struggled at all, even when you saw him. I would rather have been the one on the shore—with room to rant, and rave, and tear up and down; I cannot keep still."

"Don't say that," said Lady Everard earnestly. "I am always so afraid of saying I *cannot* do anything. This little girl of mine"—turning to the corner where Mademoiselle was recovering her temper in silence—"is so full of energy, that she quite takes away my breath."

"Ah, so!" said Mademoiselle, drawing a long breath. "It is express everywhere now. Frightful! frightful! somebody must suffer for it some day."

And so they talked and laughed until they came to Stafford, where they separated for the present.

Meanwhile Miss Agnew and nurse had not led the life of lotus-eaters since their hasty journey to France with the other members of the family. Philip had sulked a good deal over Essie's illness, which was the way that sorrow generally took with him; he had refused to speak French, or, indeed, make any attempt

to do so, until a letter from Esther, marked "private," had apparently altered his designs, and set him to work with an energy that threatened to bring on brain fever. Chrissie, gentle and imperturbable as ever, had given herself up to the little ones, and had thus gained nurse's ungrudging approbation. "If Miss Essie had a bit of your quietness," nurse used to say at night sometimes, "she'd do well; but she's that rampant"—for they had none of them realised as yet how sadly that process of quieting down had been going on for Essie, and how they would miss the eager, active figure, and imperious ways. When she did arrive, however, and was lifted out, white and tired, and laid upon the drawing-room sofa, the children stood looking at her in awe-struck silence, and nurse went up to the nursery to cry.

It had rained incessantly for three whole days—not the ordinary light, pleasant summer rain, but a downpour such as Staffordshire can alone produce for any length of time—the great drops splashing up from the pavement, and chasing each other like little rivers down the nursery windows.

Grumphie was standing looking eagerly out when Miss Agnew opened the door and saw him. The bustle of arrival was over, and tea had been ordered up into Essie's own room, where a cheerful little log fire was making a welcome in the midst of the outside damp and cold. Baby and nurse had gone down refreshed to comfort the wanderers, and Miss Agnew had come up, at Essie's request, to complete the party by Grumphie's presence.

"What are you doing?" she said, pausing perplexed at his riveted gaze. "The rain is nothing new surely?"

Grumphie turned gravely round. "I was looking for a rainbow, please," he said.

"But why?" said Miss Agnew. "It is not the least likely there will be one to-day."

"I was looking," went on Grumphie, hanging his head in a frightened, half-ashamed manner, "because it looked like a flood, you know, and I was afraid God had forgotten."

"God never forgets, Grumphie."

"Only just by a mistake," said the child, turning back to the window. "I want to go to Essie now."

He followed Miss Agnew downstairs in

silence and comparative quietness, leaving philosophical and biblical questions to solve themselves at some more convenient moment. At the door of Essie's room Lady Everard met him, and he stretched out his two arms and clung to her.

"I want to go to Essie," he said. "Is she here?"

"Yes, she is here," said grandmamma.

She put out her hand to feel if the door was open, and then she set him down gently, and



he peeped in. There was no light in the room as yet, except the red flashes that flickered about the cosy grate, and caught the answering flash in two or three pairs of

bright eyes, where two or three little dark figures knelt upon the rug. Nurse was taking off baby's socks, and warming his little pink toes at the blaze, while Chrissy

stroked the soft feet furtively, and made him smile and purr like a little kitten. Phil was kneeling close to the head of the sofa that had been wheeled round into the warmest cheeriest corner, and on the sofa itself Grumphie saw a straight, still form covered by a rug, while on the pillow rested a head with short hair, and a sadly tired little face, with sleepy eyes.

"Grumphie," cried Essie, with a sudden smile; "I *am* so glad—don't you know me?"

"No," said Grumphie, drawing back.

"Not even know *me*!" said Essie aghast.

"Oh, look again!"

Grumphie looked. "I don't know you a speck," he remarked presently, and flopped down incontinently on the foot of the sofa.

"Dear Georgie," said Essie, with tears in her eyes. "Please get up—you give me great pain—come and speak to me."

Grumphie got up slowly, and stood waiting, and tickling the baby's legs surreptitiously.

"Where have you come from to-day?" asked Essie, trying to draw him out.

"Nowhere."

"Who have you been with all day?"

"No one," with another obvious attempt to take possession of the sofa, frustrated by Philip.

"Oh, Grumphie!" with reproachful emphasis from Chrissie. "Tell Essie about the voyage, and the people, and France."

"What shall I tell about them?" said Grumphie, feigning interest.

"Oh, you know, Grumphie—what did you do there?"

"Nothing."

Essie laughed, and Grumphie immediately deposited himself for the third time on the foot of the sofa.

Chrissie dragged him off, and placed him on a chair at some distance, while grandmamma said—"Then the cross-examination of the witness ceases."

"It's no use," said Chrissie tearfully, turning indignant glances on the imperturbable Grumphie, who, removed from nurse's immediate range of vision, had taken off his necktie, and was cutting it to shreds.

"No, it's no use," he repeated, shaking his head sorrowfully. "Perhaps I had better go back to the nursery—I can't remember anything."

"And how's Jeremy?" asked Essie, detaining him as he climbed down.

The whole little face lighted up instantly. "Oh, *fat*," he said. "Fat as me—he eats two flies to a meal now, and he's my friend."

"Do you know me now?" asked Essie, almost pathetically.

"Almost!" he cried, putting his fat hands over his eyes. "I almost remember that you're Essie."

That night, long after Esther, tired out, was sleeping beside Lady Everard, and the little ones were in the land of dreams, Philip, in his great room at the top of the house, was sitting by the table, with his head buried in his hands. Before him there lay his box of "treasures," jealously guarded from little pilfering fingers: a photograph of his father in uniform—a lock of his mother's hair—a gold locket; but in his hand was a coloured photograph of Essie's bright face, taken years ago, the eyes looking frankly into his, the lips parted; and over this he was sobbing brokenly—such passionate tears as no living soul had ever seen him shed.



CHAPTER XI.

GRUMPHIE.

“Ah, happy years! once more, who would not be a boy!”

NO one ever knew of that little episode in Philip's life, just as no one ever guessed at his passionate love for Esther. He was a strangely shy, nervous, reticent boy—“cowardly,” as his more outspoken sister said frankly every now and then, when some hidden mischief came to light, and his lips faltered over a denial. But it was not exactly cowardice: there was a something stirring at his heart, a strength of silence, of fortitude, underlying his faltering tongue, that might rise to almost anything in time, if rightly taken; but all the same, nobody in the house quite trusted Philip. He was deceitful, they all said, and even grandmamma spoke more sharply to him than to the others, when perhaps he needed kindness most.

It was not punishment that he feared, but an angry word. He could not realise how the truth spoken boldly meets with its own reward in an answering frankness, although he envied Essie that gift of a ready tongue and fearless speech that always left such a favourable impression. So, while Essie was sighing to herself over Philip's sulkiness, he himself was preparing for his return to school, miserable, harassed, anxious, uncomforted by one reassuring word as to Essie's future.

"Good-bye," he said, hanging over the end of her sofa. "You won't be able to waste your time here much longer."

Essie's soft eyes filled with reproachful tears "As if I *liked* being idle," she said. "Phil, how can you? Well! good-bye."

So Philip went away more wretched than ever.

Grumphie was to go to a school too—a day-school in the town—as he was beginning to ride rough-shod over Miss Agnew. It was Polly's duty to capture him in the morning—to brush his hair smooth, tie his blue necktie, and convey him, relentless of struggling and coaxing, to Mr. Anderson's institution for young gentle-

men in the next street, where he was instructed in the three R's to the satisfaction of every one but himself.

His going made everyone unhappy in the house. His return was the signal for an hour's misery at "preparation;" but as his spirits did not seem broken, nor his health injured, grannie clung to her determination, in spite of tearful looks and faint reproaches on all sides.

One day, however, he came back more depressed than usual. After much questioning, it turned out that he had taken Jeremy with him in his pocket, and had consequently got into trouble.

"I lost him, grandmamma," he said, with a burst of tears. "My little Jeremy! he were gone to look for flies, and they were all so *selfish*—so dreadfully selfish."

"Not Miss Anderson, I am sure," said Lady Everard, gently interrupting.

"Oh, she were the selfishest of all," said Grumphie, with tears streaming down his cheeks. "She found him herself, and put him in a cupboard, and I heard him sobbing."

"Oh! come, Grumphie!"

"I did," he went on piteously, "and when I

looked round, one of the other boys had dressed himself up in her spectacles, and she punished *me.*"

"That does not sound quite fair," said Lady



Everard. "Are you sure, my darling, that you had done nothing?"

"I forget," said Grumphia, hanging his head.

"Rubbish!" cried Essie, raising herself on her elbow. "Tell us what you had done."

"I gave him the spectacles," cried Grumphie, with sudden smiles illuminating his face. "He's older than me—about ten, I should think—he's Tom Morgan."

"You neither of you seem very model boys," said Miss Agnew.

"Oh, he's jolly!" said Grumphie, drying his eyes. "He was shut up with Mary Taylor once in a cupboard for a punishment, and he took a big pair of scissors with him, and cut off a whole tail of her hair."

The next morning there was more difficulty than ever in getting Grumphie to school, and when at last the mournful procession was got under way, the rest of the household were left in visible distress. At four o'clock Miss Agnew began to fidget over jam for tea, and Essie got out her new scrap-book, while grandmamma brought up her knitting, and was ready with a story; but there was no story needed that afternoon, and when the knitting was put away at night, not much progress had been made, for they were thinking of other things than work or play.

Grumphia never came home. Polly went out at four o'clock, as usual, to bear the brunt of his temper on the way home; Chrissie watched for his coming, as usual, from the nursery window; but Polly came back round the corner of the street in ten minutes' time, running quickly, and with a scared look on her face.

"Master Grumphia's been gone this hour," she said. "He told Miss Anderson as he couldn't stop no longer, so she sent him home—but he hasn't come."

"Little monkey!" said grandmamma, smiling an odd, constrained smile, while one intense yearning for sight flashed through her whole blind life. "Don't be frightened, children," for she could hear, where she stood, Essie's quick panting breaths. "Polly, run round again, and see if he has gone alone."

Not alone, it seemed. Tom Morgan and another boy had disappeared also.

That was a relief, at any rate. "They can't come to much harm," grandmamma kept saying, as much to persuade herself as those other people gathered silently round her. "He will be frightened when it gets dark, and come home."

But when it grew dark, and the lamps were lit in the street, and the shutters shut, and still no little feet came tramping up the front steps on which Poll stood watching, and no baby voice came with soft good-nights, grand-mamma laid aside that pretence of calmness, and roused herself to action. The police were communicated with. Mr. Anderson took a part of the town himself for a thorough search—the servants wandered helplessly and uselessly about the area steps—nurse moaned over the cruelty of schools in general—while the children crouched shivering together on Essie's bed, too miserable for tears.

The night had never seemed so long to any of them—the morning never so grey and misty, breaking down, by eight o'clock, into a thick, drizzling rain. They were all tired out, but still Polly went every five minutes to look up and down the wet street, and still everything was being done that could be done to trace the child.

And at last, when they were almost losing hope and patience—when grandmamma had fallen into an uneasy doze by Essie's sofa—when Chrissie had sobbed herself into the

lowest depths of wretchedness, there came a sudden diversion.

Polly broke in upon them, wide-eyed, flushed, and smiling.

"Oh, if you please, my lady," she said, "he's come."

Grandmamma, who had remained her own sweet, placid self all through the fierce excitement of the night, broke down now into hysterical tears, but Polly roused her. "And, if you please, he's with a policeman," she said, "and he says he must see you, my lady, immediate."

Lady Everard roused herself with an effort. She kissed Essie, and then put her hand on Polly's shoulder, and went slowly downstairs, until, at the open drawing-room door, she paused. "Georgie," she said, in a low, quavering voice, "are you quite safe?"

Grumphie—seated, a miserable, dirty, tired little figure, on his own high chair—sobbed audibly.

"Take me down," he cried passionately, struggling from his elevation. "Grandmamma, kiss me."

The policeman, who had been standing stiffly

at "attention," in deference to Lady Everard's pathetic entrance, turned and lifted the child down; in a minute Lady Everard's neck was circled by a pair of rough young arms, and a wet tear-stained cheek was lying against hers.

"Don't cry," she said, while tears rolled down from her own sightless eyes. "My sweetheart, don't sob like that, but let me hear the story."

"Tea," murmured Grumphie, while his heavy eyes kept closing.

"Are you hungry?" cried Lady Everard aghast. "Here, Polly, take him to the nursery, and give him everything he wants;" and she kissed the red cheeks once more, and dismissed him into honourable captivity.

"And now," she said, turning her gentle, wrinkled face into the centre of the room, "will you tell me, please, where you found him?"

The policeman was smiling, but Lady Everard could not see that—she could only hear the short, quick answer—

"Next door, my lady."

"But where?" persisted Lady Everard, puzzled.

"In the cellar, my lady."

"But was he alone?" she asked, excited and perplexed. "What were they doing? Were they there all night?"

"They were, my lady," the man said, turning his own honest, kindly eyes on my lady's drooping lids. "They ran away from school, it seems, three on 'em, and when night came on, they knew of no other place for shelter than the coal cellar next door."

"And no blankets—no food—nothing!" said grandmamma, clasping her hands.

"Nothing," said the policeman, grimly—"leastways except a tin of biscuits, and a novel of Mr. Marryat's—I took the liberty of looking—and a Bible belonging to your young gentleman—returned"—laying his hand on Grumphie's white ivory Church Service, that had black finger-marks all over it. "Me and another man were out all night, my lady," he went on presently, "but we were on the wrong scent, and lucky it was that I saw your young master a squeezing of his fingers through the hinges of the door this morning."

"Was he hurt?" inquired Lady Everard, trembling.

"Not he, my lady," said the man. "There were rats in the cellar, it seems, and he got frightened, and opened the door a chink to let them out, and me and my mate was waiting about to speak to you, my lady, when I see his fingers in the crack. 'That's my young gentleman,' I says, 'as sure's fate,' and I down and pounces on 'em—and here they are."

"Thank you," grandmamma said, still trembling. "I will go and see that he is quite right. You have taken so much trouble, and have eased my mind so much, that you must let me thank you more practically;" and grandmamma gave him something from her purse, that made him unbend suddenly in every muscle, and wander from the "attention" point.

"God bless you, my lady!" he said, with a sudden huskiness in his clear voice—"and the rent was due to-morrow."

Then grandmamma crept upstairs again, to join in the pæan of rejoicing that was meeting over Essie's sofa, on which Grumphie—a cleaner, rosier, less hungry Grumphie—was sleeping the sleep of innocence and exhaustion.



CHAPTER XII.

THE GROUSE.

"Behold the child, by Nature's kindly law,
Pleased with a rattle, tickled with a straw."

FOR once in the memory of her grandchildren Lady Everard was firm, and Grumphie gained nothing by his escapade. With many tears, and much cross-questioning, he allowed that the plan had been concocted by the two other boys first, and he had only been admitted into the secret because of some chance observations he had overheard. Captain Marryat's books, read eagerly, were responsible for the first suggestions, which they had tried so hard to carry out, even to the taking with them of Grumphie's ivory Bible. Chrissie was still inclined to look upon the whole thing through the medium of prejudice, and to con-

sider that Grumphie was unjustly persecuted, when he was led off by Polly next morning, as a sort of state prisoner; but Essie was wiser, and understood how necessary a little decision was in such a case.

Essie was getting better at last—very slowly and very painfully, but still enough to be able to move from room to room, with hopes of by-and-by being almost as strong as she had been. Almost, for the doctor told Lady Everard that there would always be a certain tendency to weakness in her spine, so that carefulness and rest would be indispensable, at least till she was full grown. In the meantime, she accepted her inactive life with the same ready cheerfulness that was her strongest characteristic, and made an atmosphere of brightness in her pretty room, into whose circle no one could pass uncharmed. Polly, above all, wondered sometimes how she had ever dared to speak as she had done to one whose life, even now, was such a “good gift” to them all; but day by day Essie’s standard was growing higher and higher—a ladder to which Poll’s simple faith had been a stepping-stone.

“Do you ever hear anything of Tom here?”

she asked one afternoon, as they sat sewing together in the failing light. "Silverdale is not so far from here."

"I walked over the other day," said Polly, brightening. "I heard a deal about him from some folks. They called him Mr. M'Dougal, and for a bit I couldn't make out who they meant."

"How nice," said Essie. "Poll, I wish he could come here again."

"So do I," said Polly, dropping her needle, and then they both sat for a minute or two, looking idly out into the deepening twilight; but, for all their looking, they neither of them could see one step into the future—they neither of them could guess when, and in what manner, Tom M'Dougal was to come back to Silverdale.

Essie came back from her day-dream with a laugh, and threw her work across to Polly. "Fold it up, please," she said; "I am tired."

"Are you, miss dear," said Polly, anxious and alert in a minute. "Then I'll tidy up a bit, and get tea quickly, if you'll just go down to my lady in the drawing-room."

That evening Polly strolled out beyond the houses into the midst of yellow cornfields,

ready for harvest, and listened to the song of sleepy birds, and the whirr of bats, until the harvest moon rose majestically over the darkening world, and the birds' song died into an occasional twitter. She took out Tom's last



letter, and read it through again—how mother was fretted by the bad season, and father was failing, and the children were hard to feed—but “you’re earning something, thank God!” it wound up; “so that eases things a bit,

and you've got to be thankful to my lady all your life for the lift she's given you; that's a good lady, Polly, and we owe her and Miss Essie a vast deal,"

"That we do," Polly commented, as she folded up the crumpled paper. "Tom always says things right. So I'd best just go home, and see what I can do for them."

When Essie got down to the drawing-room, she found Lady Everard dozing by the fire, and Grumphie curled up on the rug at her feet, watching the red-hot coals. The opening and shutting of the door disturbed them.

"Why, Grumphie," said grandmamma, "how quiet you have been. I have been thinking a long while."

"You have been asleep," said Grumphie, solemnly. "It's me that has been thinking."

"I!" corrected Essie.

"Whose I?" said Grumphie, rousing himself for battle. "It's me—*me*—ME!"

"Hush!" said grandmamma, gently. "Tell me what you have been doing all this time."

"Before it rained," said Grumphie, "we were out with Poll—Chrissy and me. We raced the omnibus, grandmamma, oh! ever so far, and

the driver cheered us on, and whipped up the horses—but," he concluded dolefully, looking down at his fat legs, "Chrissy won—she goes like the wind."

"Like a streak of greased lightning," said Essie.

"What's that?" asked Grumphie, curiously.

"It is a phenomenon of nature," explained Essie, "like a comet, and an eclipse, and a rainbow. Talking of rainbows, oh, grannie, I wish it would stop raining."

"So do I," said Grumphie, leaning his two elbows heavily on grandmamma's knee—"or I wish it would just rain always one day in the week—Saturdays! or no—Sundays. Oh, grannie, I *do* wish it would just only rain on Sundays!"

"Why, you wicked boy!" cried Essie, shocked. "Wet Sundays are horrid. I can't bear sitting in church all drenched through."

"Ah! but we wouldn't go to church," said Grumphie.

"Grandmamma," said Esther, really distressed; "he ought to like church, oughtn't he?"

Grandmamma stroked the soft, eager face

held up to her. "When he is a little older, and a little wiser," she said, smiling gently, "he will like church, I think, as much as I do."

"Ah! but I don't want to get older," said Grumphie. "Grannie"—he broke off suddenly—"might I have a ferret?"

"Where would you keep it, my dear?"

"Oh, just to play with Jeremy," explained Grumphie. "Miss Agnew said to-day that animals did not like being alone—and so I 'spect Jeremy finds it dull; he's had to be shut up in the toy-box all to-day."

"That *does* sound dull," said grandmamma; "but what made you think of a ferret?"

"Because I saw one," said Grumphie, "in the farmer's yard—oh! and I saw a rat too, a jolly big one. I frightened him too—awfully, Chrissy and me. Miss Agnew said she thought he would go to his home and die of fright."

"Well, go down now," said Lady Everard, "before tea, and tell cook to be *sure* and hang up the grouse that came this afternoon."

"What's grouse?" he asked.

"Birds," said Lady Everard. "Birds that you eat."

"What ! feathers on them, and everything ? oh, jolly !"

The door banged shut, and he was gone.

In ten minutes' time there came a knock at the door, and, in answer to Essie's clear voice, Poll appeared on the threshold, very quiet, and a little pale.

"If you please, my lady," she said, "I went into the schoolroom to lay tea, and them birds, my lady, are flying about the room."

"What birds ?" asked Lady Everard, perplexed.

"The grouse, my lady."

"Nonsense !" cried Essie, in fits of laughter. "Oh ! Poll, how odd. I must go and see—and Poll, infected by the laughter, went speeding down the staircase again, side by side with Essie's nimble figure.

The schoolroom door was open—the gas was very low, and the two birds were certainly hovering over the table with outspread wings. Grumphie, in ecstasies of laughter, was dancing about the room like a maniac. He had taken his arms out of his jacket, and had substituted wooden spades, so that his appearance was ludicrous in the extreme.

"Turn up the gas, Poll," said Essie. "Grumphie, keep still—where is Chris?"

"In the nursery," sang Grumphie, jumping about more quietly; "putting her stupid old



doll to bed with the kitten—and nurse is going to dress her for tea."

"And what have you been doing?" said Essie, as she climbed on a chair, so as to enable her to reach the gas; "we shall soon see."

There was no answer but that of laughter from Grumphie.

The gas flared up at the touch of Essie's quick fingers, revealing Grumphie's round, merry face, and wide-open blue eyes, and the tea-table, above which fluttered the birds, with Poll's quiet white face by way of background. Essie could not help laughing as she saw the ingenious manner in which a string had been fastened to the backs of two chairs, and the grouse arranged, with outspread wings, and feet firmly tied.

"How foolish you are," she said, when she had regained her breath.

"I'm not foolish—I'm clever!" cried Grumphie, delighted. "I did it all myself. I tied the string—I opened his wings—I frightened Polly—oh! jolly, jolly, jolly!"

"Then, if you are so clever," said Esther, practically, "you can just undo it all yourself, whilst I go up and tell grannie."

"Grannie won't be angry," said Grumphie, as he discarded the spades, and set his busy little fingers to work; "she'll only laugh."

Which showed how thoroughly Grumphie

had mastered the details of Lady Everard's character. When the laugh was over, and the children were in bed, Esther said—"Grand-mamma, don't you think it would keep you awake nicely to tell us a story. Polly *does* so want to hear the end of the *beheadals*—that's a word we got from a book we read—so she might come and listen too, I think, and Miss Agnew promised to teach me knitting."

"Would you like a story, Annie?" hesitated Lady Everard, turning to where Miss Agnew sat on the fender stool, with the firelight flashing on her restless needles. If Lady Everard had not been blind, she would have thought, perhaps, as Essie did, how pretty the slight figure looked in the tight-fitting black dress, and what a charm there was about the bright resolute face, upraised in answer. "Of course I should," she said, in her quick, hearty voice. "Like it? why, of all things, I love stories."

"Stay still a moment," cried Essie, starting forward, "just as you are. I never thought before the holidays that you were so pretty. I think giving lessons ages people. Oh, grand-mamma! if you could only see her."

"Is she so pretty?" said grandmamma, with

her softest, sweetest smile. "I am glad of that—I always like to fancy good people very pretty."

"Then I hope you fancy me beautiful," said Essie, mischievously.





CHAPTER XIII.

MADAME LA BARONNE.

"All is right that seems most wrong, if it be His sweet will."

"**W**E are quite comfortable," said Essie, stretching herself out on the rug, with her face to the fire. "At least I am, and the others must speak for themselves."

"And what am I to tell you about?" said Lady Everard, laying her knitting aside. "You know my stories best, Essie, so you may choose."

"Oh! it is the end of Madame la Baronne that we want to hear about," said Essie. "Don't you remember where you got to? I have told it to Miss Agnew as far as that, and Poll remembers."

Poll was sitting on the extreme edge of a straight-backed chair, with her small, strong hands deftly arranging and altering some long

white seam. Grandmamma was lying idly back, every now and then stroking the soft head upon her knee. Miss Agnew's needles were clicking and flashing in the firelight, as she knitted into her unromantic grey stocking all the hopes and fears, terrors and fitful glory of Lady Everard's romantic story.

"Madame never heard, you know," said grandmamma, "whether the young people had really got away safely after all. She had done her best, and she left the rest to God; before her lay imprisonment, insults, tortures, death, but she did not shrink from them; she had paid her life away as the price of those other lives, and she was not one to regret a spoken word. Her life in the Conciergerie has been spoken of so often amongst us, that it has grown almost sacred, and many of her words and deeds were told by one who was liberated when Robespierre fell, and who came to give what comfort he could to the wives and children of those who had perished from the prison-house.

"Madame, he said, was herself to the last. Witty, cheerful, brave—loyal to God and king—gentle and tender to those weaker than

herself. To one child—a miserable, frightened little thing of twelve—she was a kind of guardian angel and liberator in one, for, after Madame came, and took the little head to her breast, and spoke those sweet, womanly, brave words that stilled the passionate weeping, there were no more tears on the white face.

“It so chanced, that when the morning came that was to set Madame la Baronne free from the captivity against which she chafed, that the child’s name was read out next to hers:

“‘Citoyenne Ste. Etienne; Citoyenne Joséphine Fourquier.’

“They were playing cards at the time—Madame la Baronne, a younger woman whose husband had gone the day before, and two old, brave gentlemen—one a general—who had known Madame in the days of her prosperity.

“The child, Joséphine, raised her head, with its startled, fawn-like eyes, from the folds of Madame’s black dress, as the name rang through the room; but Madame herself shuffled the cards, and passed them with a smile to her neighbour.

“There was a moment’s pause—then the words were repeated; but Madame only raised

her head, and said, without a shade of deepening colour on her beautiful old face—

“ ‘Your deal, M. le Général.’

“ ‘Monsieur le Général bowed very low.

“ ‘Madame,’ he said; ‘pardon that I mention to you a subject so unfortunate in the midst of our pleasant game, but you are wanted.’

“ ‘Citoyenne Ste. Etienne!’ For the third time the name echoed down the room—this time with an angry, impatient accompaniment of oaths, and at last Madame turned.

“ ‘That is not my name,’ she said. ‘However,’ and she smiled at her old partner, who had risen, and was pushing the cards aside with trembling fingers, ‘M. le Général, we must forgive *ces autres* that they are so ignorant of our names; in time they may learn them—to their cost. For me,’ and she smiled her sweet, solemn smile again, ‘Madame here will take my place.’

“ ‘Madame la Baronne de Ste. Etienne,’ said the old man, bowing low, as he gave her, for the last time, the title she had borne so proudly, ‘no one can replace you. Adieu!’

“ ‘She stooped to raise the child, who was

crouching and shivering at her feet. 'It is "au revoir" only,' she said. 'Vive le Roi!'

"So, with the child's hand in hers, she swept down between those thinning ranks, as grandly and proudly as though the guillotine was the step of a throne.

"No one spoke, but feverish lips lay for a minute, as she passed, against her gown, her hand—and there were many who envied the child the death these two were to meet together."

"Dear Lady Everard," said Miss Agnew, dropping her knitting in her lap, so that the stitches slipped off the shining, flickering needles. "It is the gloomiest story I ever heard. I am thankful that I cannot count an ancestor among the doomed."

"It is *splendid*," cried Essie; "oh! go on, grandmamma, I cannot breathe for anxiety to hear the end. Polly, don't shiver like that! remember it all happened when grandmamma was young."

"Nearly seventy years ago," said Lady Everard. She spoke slowly and gently, with no new emotion in her voice or face. These stories of horror, and misery, and crime, had

no power to move her as did her own simple memories of her younger days, and of the husband who had been their glory.

"There is so little more to tell," she said; "just the end. All the way in the tumbril Madame knelt with her arm round the child, shutting out with her wrinkled hand the coarse, rough faces, the horrible sights, from those pitiful, frightened eyes. All down the weary way, that had been trod by her Queen before, Madame de Ste. Etienne made her triumphal progress to the foot of the guillotine, where those unsexed women sat with their needles flashing in the sunlight, and counted the proud heads forfeited.

"Was I wrong, Esther, in calling her progress a triumph? I think not. Let the child answer whose heavy heart beat more quietly under her gentle touch. Let the few answer who bared their heads, instinctively, as the tumbril passed down the crowded street. Let the women answer who forgot to count *one* head of the hundreds that fell that day.

"She stepped down unaided, guiding the child in front of her up the wooden steps, that were truly, to her, the ladder leading to

heaven. Then, with her own hands she fastened up the straight brown hair into a knot above the dazed, piteous, miserable face, out of which all the softness of childhood had been driven before the awful misery of such a death, and, stooping, she whispered one word—‘You go first,’ she said; ‘shut your eyes to everything but heaven.’

“‘But the guillotine?’ shuddered the child. ‘Heaven is so far away.’

“‘Only one step,’ said Madame softly. ‘Look up, child, look up!’

“The stiff, clinging fingers relaxed their hold as the child was forced forward, but there was still that restless, maddened look in the large soft eyes.

“Madame sighed, and even as she sighed the child raised her head and looked back.

“There was no misery, no suspense, no madness now in the steady shining eyes, in the unearthly sweetness of that last smile.

“‘Thank you,’ she said.

“The axe fell, and severed the dainty head; the tricoteuse, without shame or hesitation, knitted in another name to the long list of the

slain. The shining blade was gasping for another victim—it was Madame's turn.

"She stood straight for an instant, in her black dress, and stern, imperious beauty—a blot against the glory of the sky—raising appealing hands to Heaven. The cry for her king that had been on her lips so constantly during those long fourteen days found no utterance now. In the face of death, of judgment, of eternity, her grand and simple soul had no room for any complex reasoning or jarring thought. Face to face with God—His presence satisfied her. 'O God! I thank Thee for my death!' she cried, and so entered into life."

There was a long pause, then Essie said, in a voice that sounded uncommonly like a sob—

"Miss Agnew is crying, grannie—you were so impressive."

"It is such a sad, such a terribly sad story," said Miss Agnew, brushing away the tears that had caught Essie's wondering gaze. "Could you not tell us something a little more cheerful now, just to take to bed with us. Here is Polly pallid with terror."

"Just some little anecdote about grandpapa," suggested Essie, who had a great admiration for

the handsome original of the miniature that hung above Lady Everard's bed. "Oh! tell them about his birthday."

"I will tell you about another birthday nearer your own time. Listen! There was a little girl once—an only child—a little dark, soft, clinging thing, not pretty perhaps, but beautiful in the eyes that loved her. Now this little girl used to come every morning when the sun rose, and stand in her white night-dress at a door that always was opened at her touch, and before she came in, she would say, 'Bonjour! bonjour!' and bow her pretty, dark head, with a grace she had learned from her French father. Well, one day this little damsel rose as usual, but she did not come as usual to that closed door, or say 'bonjour' softly on the threshold; she dressed herself instead in her fête-day dress—old-fashioned you would call it now, Esther—and stole out into the garden, hurting her hands with mastering the heavy bolts and bars.

"Then she ran to her own garden, where the roses were blooming, and the mignonette scenting the fresh morning air, and filled her green skirt with the dewy blossoms. After that she

went down to the wicket, at which two other children waited with great baskets of flowers, and they all three crept away together, across the fields—this house was quite in the country then—to a pretty gabled house—you know it, Essie, for you lived there till your dear mother left—where a little boy was sitting at an open window, with his two plump elbows resting on the sill.

“‘I thought you were never coming,’ he said, stretching eagerly out; ‘only you promised.’

“Two of the children lifted up their heavy baskets, and broke out into a shrill, pretty song, with wishes for a happy birthday, but the little maid in green relapsed into a sudden shy silence, and held up her apron full of blossoms without a word!”

“There, Essie, go to bed, and dream of your pretty dark-haired mother, and the boy who loved her all his life, as I have done so often.

“Years upon years afterwards, when the boy had grown into a man, and the little girl came to tell me another story, that was to take a great deal of sunshine out of my lonely life, they told me, both together, with shy laughter



and pretty smiles, that little episode that I had never guessed at."

"What a dear old grannie you are," cried Essie, throwing herself against the gentle lady, and almost smothering her with kisses. "I think you have the very sweetest stories in the world."





CHAPTER XIV.

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING.

"That tenderest joy—the heart-love of a child."

Carroll.

IT was a very little while after this that a pleasant surprise came to Esther, unawares.

She was sitting by the schoolroom window one afternoon, hurrying over her last lesson, to be in readiness for a walk in the pleasant twilight, when she was roused by a ring at the front door.

In a minute she had risen, and was peeping through the lowered Venetians.

"My dear Esther," expostulated Miss Agnew, "do be careful. I wish you would not do things like that. You know how Lady Everard dislikes it."

"Wait!" cried Essie, turning round a radiant face. "You might guess for a month, without

having the faintest idea as to who it is. Somebody we do not even know, except by name—we only spoke to her once.”

“This is exciting,” said Miss Agnew, laughing. “I am almost tempted to come and look also—this is the effect of evil communications, Essie.”

“Why, it is Miss Liskeard,” said Essie, “and somebody, that I suppose is her mother—the girl, you know, that Jim saved. Now good-bye, lessons, and you, Miss Annie, for the rest of the afternoon, for I shall be sent for presently. I may as well begin to put the things away.”

True enough, in five minutes Polly came to say that Lady Everard would be much obliged if Miss Esther could be spared to take Miss Liskeard into the garden.

“Jolly!” said Essie, hurling herself upon Miss Agnew. “You dear old thing, I hope you will enjoy yourself without me. I will bring you back all the news I can.”

Then she ran up to tidy her hair before presenting herself in the drawing-room.

The drawing-room of No. 5 Berkeley Crescent was a long, narrow room, with a

bow window, in whose recess blossomed the sweetest flowers of the season, summer and winter. Lady Everard had a passion for flowers—such flowers, at least, as she could enjoy in her blindness. Just now the whole house was scented with mignonette, and when Essie came softly into the drawing-room, Miss Liskeard was kneeling by the window in among a perfect wilderness of blossoms.

She had taken off her hat, so that it might not brush the flowers as she stooped to smell them, and her curly hair had been a little tumbled in the process, so that she had to push it back from her face, as she came across to Essie.

She was old for her years, both in looks and manner, but very pretty, and simple for all that—more old-fashioned than old, perhaps—from the complete dependence of her mother on this stronger will. Her face was colourless, but not delicate looking—her eyes large, and soft, and expressive—her hands perfect in shape. Essie, with her keen sense of all beauty, was struck and fascinated by this beautiful, quiet girl.

“I am so glad to see you,” she said, almost shyly for her. “We never thought of your

being up near us at all. It is a great surprise."

"We came up to spend a month with relations in your neighbourhood, and I told mother about you—you see I remembered your address—and made her drive over. She was so afraid that you would have forgotten me."

"Forgotten!" cried Essie, with a quick, reproachful look at the small woman making conversation to Lady Everard at a little distance; "no indeed!"

"I knew you would like to hear," went on Miss Liskeard, "that we have settled to take Jim M'Dougal abroad with us this winter, as page. Do you think he will really like it? He jumped at the idea quite eagerly; but you know them well, I think."

"Indeed I do," said Essie, colouring with pleasure. "*Nothing* could be better, I should say. That leaves Tom to fish, and look after them all at home—and Annie to mind the baby. Oh! they ought to do much better this winter."

"It is so difficult to think of anything or any way to really help people," said Miss Liskeard; "because nothing can repay Jim

M'Dougal for what he did for me. My life may not be very valuable to the general public, you know, but it is everything to me—a good gift, as mother says sometimes.”

“Does she?” cried Essie; “how funny! That is just what Tom M'Dougal called Polly's life once—and mine. Since then, I think of it as a gift sometimes, and enjoy it. I remember saying once that if I were a cripple, or blind like poor grannie, that I did not see how I could think it a good gift then. Do you know that keeping still is the trouble of my life?”

“I can see that,” said Miss Liskeard, smiling. “You are very active—and after all, you are quite likely to have an active life; we ought not to meet trouble half way.”

“Come out into the garden,” said Essie, abruptly. “I am so glad you came. I always had a sort of idea that we should meet again.”

“Jeannette,” came in a plaintive voice from the other end of the room.

“Yes, mother.”

“Lady Everard has kindly asked us to stay to dinner. I am afraid your aunt——”

“Oh, I think it would be charming,” said Jeannette, decidedly. “We can send home

the carriage, and trust to a fly. Lady Everard, you can't think what a treat it will be to us."

"A great treat," murmured Mrs. Liskeard.

"And such a pleasure to me," said Lady Everard, sweetly. "Essie has spoken for herself, no doubt."

"Now take me into the garden, please," said Jeannette, rising, "and let me see the end of summer in your lovely roses."

"The very last roses," said Essie, dolefully; "and Grumphy in the very middle of them. Oh! grannie, he is actually trampling on my mignonette!"

"Off with you then," said Lady Everard, "and we will follow. I am afraid it is not the study of botany that has tempted Grumphy to the flower-beds."

Grumphy was certainly not satisfying a thirst for botanical knowledge, when the two girls came suddenly upon him. He had placed a footstool on the damp earth at the foot of a Marshal Niel standard rose, and was working busily at the upper branches. When Essie pounced upon him from the rear, he folded his hands tightly, with an expression on his face as

if neither torture nor wild beasts could draw a confession from him.

"Grumphie," said Essie, "I know you are in mischief—open your hand."

"Catch me!" said Grumphie, disdainfully.

"Grumphie! and visitors!" said Essie, her voice one reproachful note of exclamation. "I am surprised at you."

Grumphie drooped his head reproved, after just one wistful look at Miss Liskeard's softly smiling face; but he shut the hands he held behind him more firmly than ever.

"Grumphie! is that your name?" said the girl gently; "what a queer name! Well, Grumphie, are you fond of roses? Have you ever seen new rosebuds fastened on to old trees like this? I always think it is so funny to see quite a different kind of rose grafted on to a standard tree."

Grumphie's whole rosy face lighted up. "I was just doing that," he said in a loud whisper. "I had a piece of mignonette," opening one hot hand in which a piece of mignonette drooped limply; "and I had putty—I were grafting. John showed me how," with a defiant glance at Essie.

"You dear, funny child," she said, kissing him in her sudden, impetuous way. "I will do it for you—only we must get a nice new rosebud, and you must watch it every day, to see what happens."

Essie was very happy that evening. She had taken a sort of romantic liking for pretty Miss Liskeard, who was so much older than herself, and yet was so pleasant and simple, and made herself so thoroughly at home. That she herself was an amusing companion, from her quaintness and originality, never seemed to enter Essie's careless head—so that she lost nothing by self-consciousness. Eager, excitable, restless—it was a wonder, so nurse was always saying, how she had ever given her spine a chance of strengthening. All this evening she chattered incessantly, about her home, and Milford, and the M'Dougals, until nine o'clock came, and Mrs. Liskeard said reluctantly that they must go.

"It is getting late, Jeannette," she said. "I must disturb you. Good-bye, Lady Everard. When we come back to England, will you trust your grandchild to my care in London."

"That would be a treat," said Lady Everard.

"Then you will let us hear from you in the spring."

"Yes, indeed we will," said Jeannette, heartily. "Good-bye."

She kissed Essie, and passed out into the peaceful evening, leaving a very turbulent heart behind.

"Essie," said grandmamma, "will you wind some wool for me, or are you tired?"

There was no answer.

"Come here," said Lady Everard, holding out her arms, and Essie crept into them without a word.

Lady Everard raised her wrinkled hand, and felt softly up and down the flushed face, down which the slow tears were coursing.

She sighed, but said nothing—only she held Essie closer, and kissed her gently once or twice—sighed at the thought of what a fight life would be to this eager, impulsive, loving heart, that was beating in such passionate sorrow against her own.





CHAPTER XV.

ESSIE'S HAPPY DAY.

"Much laughter brings many tears."

SO the end of the long, sunny, delicious summer came at last.

Chrissie and Grumphia went out into the fields day after day, to watch the rank grass falling softly to the monotonous rhythm of the scythes—rolling and tumbling as happily as two little kittens in the warm hay—coming in, tired and hungry, to their meals and lessons, only to plunge out again the instant the duties of the day were over.

The last weeks of Philip's holidays brought their own especial pleasure to him also, for on the 8th of August—his birthday—grand-mamma presented to him with ceremony a beautiful gun, that his father had chosen before leaving England, and left in Lady Everard's charge until the eventful day.

"I suppose your father knows best," Lady Everard said doubtfully, as she put the weapon in Philip's hands, that were trembling with eagerness. "I have no faith in such things myself—and I suppose I shall never get Grieves for anything, now that there is the excuse of teaching you this dangerous amusement. However, I am glad you like it."

Grieves was the old butler, who had followed the fortunes of the family for years, and who would have sacrificed himself and his whole family any day, if by such means he could have served Lady Everard or the children.

Philip seized the gun, as a dog might do a bone, and ran away with it to his own room, there to unlock and unscrew every possible fixture, and investigate the contents of the case. Inside, a slip of paper was gummed to the cover, with three lines in Colonel Chester's clear, decided handwriting—

"Never leave your gun on full cock.

"Never leave it loaded for an unnecessary minute.

"Never trust it to anyone but yourself to clean."

Philip just glanced at the words, and then

forgot them, in pointing out the beauties of this new treasure to Essie. After that day, life was a burden to the rabbits in the fields round the Gable House, for, even if they escaped being actually killed, they must have been pretty nearly frightened to death by the incessant firing.

Chrissie was growing out of her babyhood very fast, and leaving Grumphie in the lurch; while he toiled about the hedgerows, and up and down the heavy roads, searching for blackberries, or watering imaginary horses at the farm ponds, gentle Chrissie would sit stringing the crimson hips and haws into glittering chains, or helping Polly to gather the autumn flowers for grandmamma.

"I hate flowers—rubbish!" Grumphie would say disparagingly, when Chrissie held up her pretty bunch for approval. "You might come and be my horse, Chrissie, like you used;" and if Chrissie's face grew disappointed for a minute, it was bright again the next, when she thought of grandmamma's loving, grateful face.

"My dear little kind grand-daughter, what should I do without you," she used to say, when the flowers were laid shyly on her knee.

"Now that I do not get about as I used, you bring the summer to me."

Polly used to be never tired either, in those days, of telling stories of her home life—of the



sunshine that had come into it suddenly, the day that the little Chesters came first to Milford, and ran riot on the sands—of the medal that had been awarded to Jim for his "gallant act," as Mr. Craven had called it in writing to

tell Lady Everard of his successful application, and of Jim's own future—for he had left his irksome life by the sea-shore, with its doubtful gain, to accept the situation of page in the family whose eldest daughter he had been the means of saving. He was going abroad with them for a year, as they had said, to Dresden, and he scrawled such happy notes to Polly, that she could not but share his happiness; but she sometimes wondered if no good things were in store for Tom also—for Tom who had settled down so cheerfully into the narrow round of his uncongenial life, and who worked so steadily and so bravely.

"If Tom were but suited," Polly used to say to Esther sometimes, with tears in her eyes, "and he so well thought of here."

And Essie would turn comforter, and kiss away the tears, and answer—"Have patience, Polly; things always come right at last—and Tom is so good."

So Polly took the comfort in faith of a brighter future, and would put on her bonnet, and walk out in the twilight to where the cross roads met, and there, looking down towards the glow of the Silverdale furnaces,



she would send her whole heart out in longing for "our lad Tom."

"We are getting along very comfortably and quietly, I think," Essie said one day, after the hay had been carried, and the family were beginning to count the days until Philip's departure—"so quietly that we need some excitement—don't you agree with me, grand-mamma?—just to cheer us up. Miss Agnew, suggest something."

"My mind is a blank," said Miss Agnew, laughing. "Come, Essie, out with your plan, whatever it is, for I know you have one."

"Yes, I have," said Essie; "but it is rather selfish, because it is a plan that will please no one but myself—not even grannie, I should think—and probably not Phil, because it affects him most. I want to go out with Philip for the whole afternoon shooting."

"Quite impossible!" said Lady Everard, decidedly. "My dear, you would be quite worn out."

"Oh, no! indeed not!" cried Essie, eagerly. "I am quite strong now."

She certainly looked strong enough, as she

leant forward with flushed cheeks, and bright, entreating eyes.

"Ah, grannie!" she pleaded; "I do so want to go—see what a lovely day. Lessons are not good for me—you said so yourself—and the rest does both Miss Agnew and me good."

"Does it look like rain, Annie?" asked Lady Everard, weakly hesitating over a denial.

"No, I cannot say it does," said Miss Agnew. "It may be showery, but it is very bright and beautiful just now."

"How about Grieves," said grandmamma, "and the danger? Oh, Essie, I hate guns."

"But Grieves would not mind a bit, I know," said Essie, "and we will be so careful—so extremely particular. Philip, you will promise not to shoot me, will you not?"

"I am not likely to do that, at any rate," said Philip, a little huffed, at the aspersions cast on his knowledge of slaughtering.

"Then that is all settled," said Essie, joyfully. "I will rush up and dress, and you will see about sandwiches, will you not?" to Miss Agnew, who was standing beside her.

"I will certainly," she answered. "I hope you will have a happy day."

There was something in Essie's sunshiny face, reflecting every ray of inward brightness, that made people sympathise with her pleasures to a wonderful extent. Miss Agnew found herself, ten minutes later, standing at the door, and looking up at the sky quite anxiously, with a faint foreboding of rain.

A hand touched her arm, and she turned. Essie, in a scarlet cloak, that set off her bright complexion and dancing eyes, was standing beside her, laughing merrily.

"What are you looking up at the sky in such a melancholy way for?" she said. "Don't think about rain."

"I thought the clouds were gathering," said Miss Agnew, pointing to a far-away bank of dim purple clouds. "We shall have a storm before night."

"Night is a long way off," said Essie, lightly. "If it rains, we can always come home again—good-bye. I am going to have a long happy day."

"Good-bye," said Miss Agnew, kissing her.

Philip came out just then, with his precious gun under his arm, and Grieves following; and so they started, Miss Agnew shading her eyes to watch them down the street.

Essie walked fast and slow in snatches, turning her pretty head round every two minutes to nod and smile to Miss Agnew on the doorstep. She and her scarlet cloak made a pretty bit of colour even in the midst of the bright sunshine.

Philip, walking beside her, looked proud and happy.

"I wish you could see them," Miss Agnew said, going indoors again, and closing the door softly behind her. "I am quite proud of my pupils."

"I think they are very good children, my dear," said Lady Everard from her arm-chair; "and you have done wonders for them. It is just Philip," and Lady Everard sighed over the black sheep of this domestic flock.

"But he is so improved," Miss Agnew said, quite eagerly. "He talks more, and is not as quiet or sullen as he used to be. I can assure you that Essie will do him any amount of good yet."

"Essie!" said Lady Everard, surprised. "why, she snubs him more than any one."

"She is so energetic," said Miss Agnew, "that she cannot understand his indifference

to everything ; but she loves him, Lady Everard—that is the secret ; why, I believe he would do anything for her.”

“ Well, we shall see,” said grandmamma. “ I hope so, I am sure.”

Meanwhile, once beyond the town, it seemed as if the two young people were equally excited. Lady Everard would hardly have recognised, in this flushed, eager, impetuous sportsman, the boy she had condemned so often as cowardly and spiritless ; his eyes were bright—his whole face lighted up—his whole soul bent on destruction.

“ This is splendid,” he said, as they clambered over the fence, and stood side by side among the underwood of the little wood which lay at the back of the Gable House. “ You shall have some shots too, Essie, if you like. I will teach you.”

“ And do you really suppose,” said Essie, shuddering, “ that I intend watching you kill these poor, harmless little rabbits ? No, indeed ! You and Grieves may just go round by yourselves. I have got a book, and I am going to enjoy myself until you come back.”

"All right," said Philip ; " we shall not be very long. Good-bye."

Directly they were out of sight, Essie crept down to the banks of the little brook that ran, clear as crystal, over its pebbly bed, and found a pleasant sheltered nook in which she could lie and read.

She opened her book and began, but a brown leaf drifting on to the page roused her, and a little squirrel touched her foot in scampering past.

She shut up "*Kenilworth*" with a quick movement of her hand, and, clasping both her hands under her head, lay back on the dry moss. The brook murmured at her feet—the sunshine shimmered through the leaves on to her scarlet cloak and closed eyes. For once in her life Esther was still—contented, for the moment, with the serene, solemn stillness of the outside world, while she caught occasional far-away shouts from Philip.

"I believe I am going to sleep," she said to herself once, as she drowsily swept away the scattered leaves that were covering her. "How pleasant it is !"

It must have been more than an hour after

that that she was roused by a shout quite near at hand, and the crackling of the dead leaves. "Essie! Essie! I say!"

Esther started up, wide-eyed and frightened.

"Why, I declare!" said Philip, parting the bushes, and looking down into her startled face, "you have been asleep, actually asleep!"

"I have been reading," said Essie, reddening.

For answer, Philip pointed to the water, where "Kenilworth," wedged against a stone, was lying soaked and ruined. "How much have you read?" he asked.

Essie laughed. "Pax," she said, "how many rabbits have you killed?"

"Five. I want to get one more before we go home. It is going to rain, I think; don't you?"

"Oh! I *hope* not," said Essie, gazing up through the interlacing branches at the darkening sky. "Well, I must fish out my book, and then I will follow you; wait for me at the stile."

"All right," he said, and ran off whistling

Essie clambered down the muddy bank to the place where the book had lodged, and dragged it out disconsolately. It was soaked

through and through into a hopeless state of wet, but Essie patiently propped open the leaves, and laid it in a sunny place to dry a little.

It was a very solemn, quiet sort of day, and Essie was reluctant to leave the noisy little brook and her comfortable seat, so she sat down again, and leant her face upon her two hands and waited.

She did not see that a storm was creeping up over the distant trees, and that the squirrels were climbing homewards. She did not see how Grieves kept turning his old face up anxiously towards the lowering sky, and pondering the wet walk home, through wood and field, with his flighty charges. Essie never looked beyond the sunshine of the moment into any gloomy future, and she never guessed how nearly her happy day had come to an end.

Philip got impatient at last, and called back to her across the sunny field, but even then she rose, half dazed, to follow him, and loitered about the brook-side, to pick a few of the great forget-me-nots that grew down to the water's edge. All this time Philip was calling, calling, and the rain was beginning to patter gently

through the branches overhead, so presently she began to follow him slowly, shuffling her feet through the fallen leaves as she went.

When she reached the stile, Philip was sitting on the top rail panting.

"A sixth!" he cried, holding out his hand to hurry her. "A splendid shot, Grieves said. Wasn't it, Grieves?"

Essie, agile as a deer, jumped up on to the rail, and stood balancing herself insecurely, as she looked down at the little dead rabbit at her feet.

"Hold it up, Phil," she said; "let me see!"

Bright, imperious, eager, with the flush of sleep still on her face—even old Grieves was struck with admiration, as she tossed back her cloak, and stretched over the stile to Philip, who was leaning down also to lift the rabbit. Their two heads touched for a minute, and the gun fell. Philip caught it with a sudden exclamation, and Essie raised her head startled. "Have a care, Master Philip," Grieves said; but the warning came too late. There was a loud report—a cry suddenly stifled—and in another minute Essie was lying straight upon the path, face downwards, and Philip, on his

knees beside her, was tearing the scarlet cloak away.

"Grieves!" he cried in a shrill, unnatural voice, "is she dead?"

The old man made no immediate answer. Trembling and terrified, he clambered over the stile, and, stooping over Essie's prone figure, raised her head, and turned her quiet, unreproachful face to Philip. He laid his hand above her heart, and felt it beating. "No, Master Philip—she's no dead, I'm thinking—but she'll be sorely hurt."

Philip, as white as she, was sobbing brokenly. "My fault," he moaned. "Oh! Essie, wake up!"

Grieves was trying to force a little brandy between the child's clenched teeth. "Nay, nay, Master Philip," he said, in his slow voice; "there's trouble enough without making more of it. It's an accident that's like enough to happen to anyone—and what with you being so careful to keep to your papa's orders, and not letting the gun be on full cock—you've been carefuller than most. How it happened I don't know, surely! Likely it caught in a brier as it fell, and the trigger snapped."

Philip was silent. He seemed confused and dazed ; for a minute he could not remember whether the gun had been on half-cock or not, and when he did remember, he tried to put the thought away.

"We must get home," he said, restlessly. "Grieves, there is blood on her arm."

"That's nought but a scratch," said the old man, tenderly turning up Essie's cotton sleeve, and laying bare a long black mark, where the shots must have touched her. "I don't see no wound. Cheer up, Master Philip. I'll get her home before she wakes up maybe."

Philip took up his gun, shuddering, and slowly followed the old man's labouring footsteps.

Every time he looked at that motionless figure an agony of remorse seized him, but even yet he would not own to himself that the fault was his.

"Grieves must know," he kept saying—to silence the voice of conscience. But whatever Grieves knew, Philip himself was the only one who knew the truth—his father's injunction, so fatally, carelessly disobeyed, was never out of his mind for a minute.

Miss Agnew was telling Chrissie stories in the drawing-room window, with Grumphie hovering between the kitten and his grandmother. The sky had clouded over, and one or two heavy drops were falling.

"Let me shut the window," she said, shivering; "how cold it has turned!"

"It is as cold as freezing," said Grumphie, leaving the kitten for a minute to give Miss Agnew his valuable assistance. "I wonder if Phil has shot anyone?"

"Any *thing*," corrected grandmamma; "he is only going out to shoot little rabbits, you know."

"Once," said Chrissie, in her soft, solemn voice, "a man shot some one by mistake—he laid his gun down and it went off. Miss Agnew, you have not finished my story; don't put me down;" for Miss Agnew had risen again, in a sudden panic, and was standing staring out of the window.

Grumphie left the kitten again, and ran across the room to look too. "You might as well be seeing a ghost," he said, "you are so dreadfully white. Why, it is only Phil."

"Phil come home!" said Lady Everard, rous-

ing herself from her arm-chair, "and safe too! Well, that is good luck."

But Miss Agnew, looking beyond Philip, had seen something else—something that made her put Grumphie away from the window, gently but firmly, and turn to the old lady whom she had grown to love.

"Dear Lady Everard," she said, putting both her young arms round the feeble figure, "there is something wrong, I fear. I will send John for the doctor at once."

"With Essie?" questioned grandmamma, in a sharp voice, that ended in a quivering cry.

"Yes."

"Oh! my blindness!" That was the only cry of agony that went up from grandmamma's aching heart to the God who should one day glorify her darkened life.

After that, she went quietly upstairs to the room where Esther was laid upon the bed insensible, and waited for the doctor, while Miss Agnew moved about with remedies.

There was no wound apparently, except the grazed arm, that might have been injured in the fall; but still, all efforts were unavailing to bring back life to those sealed eyes.

The children, shut up with Polly in the nursery, stood quietly beside her, when they saw the tears streaming down her face for love of Miss Essie, lying so silently downstairs; while Philip, restless and miserable, hovered between the stairs and the hall-door, watching for the doctor. Everyone was too much employed at the moment to think how the accident had occurred, or to trouble themselves about blaming the boy; but he, oppressed by his accusing conscience, shrank away from Lady Everard's anxious face, almost as white and marble-like as the one over which she bent.

Long before the doctor came, however, Essie opened her eyes in a puzzled, stupefied manner. "Oh! my head," she moaned. "Grannie, stay by me."

"I am here, my darling," said Lady Everard, in a quavering voice.

Then Essie started up with dilated eyes—"Don't blame Philip," she said, clutching at the hand that was laying her back with gentle pressure. "It was the gun, you know. I knocked it down—it did not touch me."

"Nobody blames Philip," said Lady Everard gently; "he is always careful."

Philip, crouched up on the mat outside the door, heard Essie's startled cry and grand-mamma's low answer, and felt relieved. "No one will know," he said. "Essie does not know—I am so glad." He tried to feel glad still—even after the doctor had come and gone, and the household had subsided into quietude. Sitting at his upper window, with the sleet and rain blowing on his face, and the shaded light from the window beneath his own streaming out into the night, he said again—"I *am* so glad—I am not sure, after all, where would be the use of saying anything."

Then, in a minute, the whole scene flashed before him, and he knew that, however much he might disguise it from himself and others, the truth was inexorable, and that unspoken lie would be a weight upon his whole after life.

"I could not bear it," he said at last, sobbing. "I will tell them to-morrow—only I cannot bear to make Essie hate me."





CHAPTER XVI.

THE END OF THE DAY.

"Sleep that knits up the ravelled sleeve of care."

AFTER the doctor had come and pronounced his verdict, the house began to settle down for the night.

Even a certain sorrow is a relief sometimes, and the doctor's words had not been hopeless.

There was no wound, he said, but the shock and the fall together had slightly injured her head, and had therefore affected her spine—her one delicate point. That it might be months, or even years, before she walked again, he did not hesitate to say ; but Lady Everard, who had been suffering intensely for three long hours in fear of what might be coming to the child, felt even this a reprieve—and they persuaded her to go to bed soothed and comforted.

Then Miss Agnew lit the gas in Essie's room,

and turned it low—took her knitting, and prepared herself for the long watches of the night.

Essie lay very still for a little while, but she was not sleeping—her hands lying outside the coverlid moved in incessant restlessness, and she kept turning her head perpetually from side to side. So presently Miss Agnew took a book, and began to read aloud, in a low monotonous voice, hoping thereby to make her sleep. Miss Agnew's own mind wandered off, however, from the pretty verses to Essie's possible future, until her voice broke suddenly, and she had to wait to steady it. Then a hot hand drew back the curtain, and Essie's eyes, large and feverishly bright, confronted her.

"Miss Agnew," she said, "you are crying."

Miss Agnew tried to brush away her tears unseen, but, failing in this, she glanced guiltily into Essie's troubled face.

"I was crying," she said, "because I am so sorry to think of the end of your happy day."

"It might have been much worse," said Essie, in a low, awestruck tone. "I might have been killed. Do you know, I have been thinking of that ever since I left off fainting. I wish I could get to sleep—I am so tired."

"You are a little feverish, you see," said Miss Agnew, getting up to arrange the scattered bedclothes. "That makes you restless; but as you are going to have the pleasure of my company all night, you must let me try and read you to sleep."

"I am so glad you are going to stay," said Essie, sinking back relieved. "Tell me, Miss Agnew, I am not going to be very ill, am I, or to die?"

"Oh dear, no," said Miss Agnew, getting up hastily, and stooping down to kiss Essie's eager face; "don't be troubled, dear—it is nothing half as bad as that."

"I am not frightened," said Essie; "I was not thinking about myself; I only thought it would be so hard for Philip."

Miss Agnew was silenced. The clock ticked wearily on, the fire died down, and the drifting shadows crept darker and darker in the far corners of the room; but Essie's face—still and motionless—lay in the full light of the lamp. Once or twice, Miss Agnew, thinking she must be asleep, drew the curtain aside, and looked at her—but every time Essie's eyes, large and wide open, met her anxious gaze

with a reassuring smile, and she took up her knitting again, and waited.

"Miss Agnew," Essie said by-and-by, after so long an interval of perfect quiet that Annie started, "I want to speak to you."

Miss Agnew rose, and took the hot hand in hers. "What is it, dear child?" she said; "shall I put some more eau-de-Cologne on your head? Are you in pain?"

"Miss Agnew," Essie said again, clasping her hand over the cool one that touched hers, "tell me what the doctor said, please. I have been thinking about it all this while, and I feel as if I must know. Shall I have to lie down always?" she said, her voice rising feverishly. "Shall I never be able to walk about any more—never?"

Miss Agnew felt the tears choking her again, but she managed to show a brave face to Esther. "I will tell you the truth," she said; "that is always the best way, I think. The doctor says that since the fever you have always had a sort of weakness in the spine, which the fall yesterday, and the shock, have probably affected again. You will have to lie down, more or less, for a year or even more—after that, you will begin

to feel the benefit of the long rest, and will get gradually all right—not quite as strong as other people perhaps, or as capable of toiling up hills, but still fairly strong. Does this satisfy you? It is the whole truth.”

“Thank you,” said Essie, with a long-drawn breath; “that comforts me.”

She lay back, quieted, on her pillow, still clasping closely Miss Agnew’s strong hand, and stroking it with a clinging movement. “Things are so much worse to look forward to, are they not, than they ever seem when they come near? I could not bear to think that I should never be able to paddle or scramble with Phil again—but I think I could bear it for a year or two. Hold me tight, Miss Agnew, I feel so nearly crying—I am afraid I shall be a dreadful worry to you now. It seems so funny,” she broke off abruptly, “to think of *me* lying still. Now Chrissie can sit for hours doing nothing; but I hate it—even for the two months after I had scarlet fever it seemed dreadful. I have always said, you know, that it was the one thing I could not bear.”

“You are brave, though,” said Miss Agnew, looking at the cheerful face, out of which the

restlessness had passed; "you are wonderfully brave, dear Essie."

"Ah, I *know* now, you see," said Essie. "Before, I was only guessing. I feel now, I think, as if I could go to sleep—only would it trouble you very much to open the window first, and see what kind of a night it is—it feels so hot."

Miss Agnew loosed her hand, and, going over to the window, opened it wide. The moon was hidden behind troubled clouds—the ivy lapped against the windows, as though pleading for shelter against the rough wind, that went whistling away over the distant hills—the day that had begun so brightly had ended in a perfect hurricane of storm and wind.

Miss Agnew shut the window softly again, and came back to the bedside shivering.

But Essie was lying serenely silent, with closed, untroubled eyes—her restless tongue silenced—her restless hands still. She had fallen asleep.



CHAPTER XVII.

LAI D ASIDE.

“They also serve who only stand and wait.”

BUT Essie had a deeper trouble in her heart than that which Miss Agnew's kind hands could reach and soothe ; she had a burden of Philip's to bear that it seemed to her sometimes almost impossible to carry alone. When he came into her room the morning after the accident, miserable and irresolute, her whole soul shone in the wistful eyes she turned upon him, as though she would force confession from him ; but Philip turned his head away, and would not meet them. What he had determined to tell in the lonely hours of that long night, seemed utterly impossible in his calmer daylight judgment. “I will wait,” he said, and so he *would* not see the pleading of Esther's eyes, or hear the quiver in her voice—or, if he

did, he misunderstood their meaning. For, when she saw that he was resolutely bent on ignoring and evading all direct questions, she turned her face to the wall for a minute, sighing, and Philip, seeing the movement, said in his miserable heart—"If she begins to hate me as it is, what would it be if she knew the truth."

"Essie," he said, creeping a little closer to her; "is grandmamma very angry? I am afraid to go down."

"You need not be afraid," said Essie, gravely. "I have seen grandmamma, and she is not cross at all."

"Nobody likes me," said Phil, with sudden vehemence; "I only don't want her to hate me more."

Again Essie turned on him those bright beseeching eyes, which he would not meet. Creeping silently away, he left her almost as miserable as himself—with the knowledge that his cowardice was building up a barrier between them added to her pain. "If he would only speak first," she kept saying to herself. "It seems to make so little difference, and is just the truth—surely he knows that I know"—

which was just the point where Philip's clear-sightedness had failed.

She was so sorry for him too—for his restlessness, his misery, his sympathy with herself. She longed to kiss him, and touch his hand, and say how little she minded anything, if only he would be truthful—how she had forgotten everything but the love between them ; but Philip gave her no opening, no fair beginning, and the opportunity was lost.

Poor Essie ! none of the love, showered recklessly upon her, could do her any good just now—no tears could give her back her lost youth, or at least all that youth had meant to her. Her waiting time had come earlier in life than it comes to most, and she had to lay her work aside in the very midst of her busy life, and sit with folded hands on one side. Grannie was old, and idleness meant only rest to her ; but to Essie it meant emptiness, and dreariness, and solitude—a setting aside from the children's rough play, as well as from her own work, for no persuasion could tempt Grumphie to her bedside—no stories could induce him to while away one of her weary hours. It meant separation from Philip too,

which was almost the hardest thing to bear of all, as she thought sometimes, as the end of the holidays drew near, and her longing for a word from him grew almost into a passion.

But Essie was learning her lesson through all this seeming discord—she understood feebly at last that this was her life too—not an interlude to be dreamed away, but her actual, real life—part of the training that was to fit her for other duties by-and-by. That, though life for her must be seen through other men's eyes, and narrowed to the limits of her pretty room, still it was a duty to be bright and cheerful, and make the most of the pleasure left her—and what she lost in activity she seemed to gain in the tender love of all about her, for she was so gentle and thoughtful for others that it seemed as if they could never do enough to spare her pain.

So the August days drifted on until the time came for Philip's return to school. When that day dawned, Essie put away from her solemnly all thought or hope of Philip's ever owning even to her that unacknowledged sin, but she dated a new future for him from that time—a future

in which there was to be no flaw, no stain, that her willing fingers could help him to avoid.

Her duty to him, in which she had failed hitherto, was clear before her, as it had grown upon her in her solitary hours of pain. In one way she knew now that she was her "brother's keeper," and she bound this burden on her future life.

"I am never afraid of anything," she said to herself once. "I *might* have helped him; at any rate we can start fair now." So she swept the past away out of sight, and across its grave she took Philip's hand again—with less arrogance, less disdain, and a higher patience, that surprised and startled him. When the moment came for him to say good-bye, however, Essie could not help a sudden tightening of her hands about his neck—a sudden, wistful question in her sweet eyes.

She gave him one more chance of redeeming his past, but he only shook off the light touch, and moved a step away.

Then Essie silently relinquished her purpose. "Dear Phil, write to me," she said, "and I will be sure and send you a hamper in about

a month. I think I can worry some jam out of grannie."

"Oh, I'll write," Philip said gruffly, turning away abruptly, because there were tears in his eyes. "It will not be very long before I am back."

"All right," said Essie, smiling through her tears. She lay quite still until the last rattle of the cab had died away—until the front door was shut, and nurse came to bring her her beef-tea—then she raised herself with a hysterical sob. "Come here," she said. "Nursie, put your arms round me, and let me cry."

Nurse promptly put down the tray, and, coming over to the bed, took the young head between her hands, and held her fast. "Nay, nay, Miss Esther," she said, half crying too, "and you so good and patient. Is it Master Phil as you're fretting after? There, there, dearie—it won't be so hard to bear—not after a bit."

"What a comfort you are," said Essie, between laughter and tears. "Promise you will not tell any one—not Miss Agnew, or any one. I feel *much* better now—see."

She put nurse at arm's length, and held up

a sweet April face, on which the smiles were struggling through tears—a face that nurse kissed with sudden vehemence.

“And to think, Miss Esther,” she said, “that I ever grudged the noise in the house—that you were too lifelike once to please me!”

“Nonsense, you foolish old woman,” said Essie, putting a hand over her mouth to stop her words. “I used to be a *fiend*, I know, and you need not think that I am going to turn over a whole new leaf yet. I mean to go on being a fiend, at intervals, for a long time.”

But she had crimsoned with pleasure, all the same, at nurse’s kind words, for she was not one who dispensed her favours with a very liberal hand.

“Nurse has actually praised me,” said Essie to her grandmother next time Lady Everard came in to rest in this quietest corner of the house. “I feel quite elated, only, grannie, I am in a difficulty—a moral difficulty—so you must give your whole mind to it. Everybody says that, now I am laid up, I ought to feel that it is for some good purpose, and make the most of it. Nurse says it is just so that the others may pet me—a sort of outlet to other

people's feelings, which would be dull for me. Miss Agnew says it is only another kind of work. Phil says it is a shame, and I must just bear it. And what do you say?"

She had raised herself on her elbow, and was looking anxiously at Lady Everard's gentle, placid face for an answer.

"I say," said grandmamma, answering with her slow smile the eager question, "that if it was me I would just rest—not idle, you understand, but rest; just taking everything—joys and sorrows—as they come, instead of rushing headlong to meet them. You know, Essie, I always say that everything goes too fast now-a-days, and so we wear ourselves out; and if I were you, I would just wait and take breath. Does that perplex you?"

"Yes, indeed it does," said Essie. "Never mind, I will try everybody's advice in turn—only I should be so sorry not to be able to dance."

"To dance!" echoed Lady Everard. "What an extraordinary mind you have! By the time you want to dance, you will probably be quite able to do so."

"Did you like dancing, grannie?" questioned

Essie, hoping to draw out some of Lady Everard's reminiscences.

"Yes, indeed I did," she answered briskly ; "and I did not do so badly either. My first dance was at the Gable House, when I was seventeen. It was New Year's Eve, and all the tenants came, and we danced in the long room—children and parents and servants altogether ; not jigs and waltzes like those giddy things they have now-a-days—but solemn quadrilles, and minuets, and contre-dances to wind up with. I was dancing with my grandfather when twelve o'clock struck ; I had on a white muslin frock—damped to make it cling—with a high waist, and holly berries in my hair ; and the instant the clock struck, we ceased dancing, and all took hands, while we sung a carol. Some of the young voices were very shrill, some of the old ones quavered, but we all joined in, and then the wassail-bowl was handed round, and we drank to a happy and prosperous New Year."

"What fun !" said Essie ; "and the last time you danced—when was it ?"

"The last time—why, that was eighteen years ago—the night before your mother

married. I have often told you of that night, Essie—do you want to hear of it again ?

“ We had given a great ball, you remember, and after supper your father danced with Esther—my daughter Esther—and they were such a handsome couple, that most people stopped to look at them. I did, for one, although my eyes were so dim all evening that I could hardly see. But just then there was a clatter of horses’ feet outside, and a ring at the hall door, that echoed and re-echoed throughout the house. I was frightened—so were the maids—the sudden peal sent a terrified silence into the merry ball-room ; but Colonel Chester loosed his hands from Esther, and strode out into the hall, flinging the door wide open.

“ There in the moonlight stood a horse, and beside it a soldier in uniform, with the bridle over his arm.

“ Colonel Chester’s regiment was quartered in the town.

“ When he saw who it was, Colonel Chester nodded to us and went out, closing the door behind him.

“ For about five minutes we stood waiting,

then first we heard the receding clatter of hoofs, next the door was opened again, and your father—pale, straight, resolute—confronted us.

“‘The worst has come,’ he said. ‘There has been a rising of the natives in Affghan. I must rejoin my regiment to-morrow.’

“And to-morrow was to have been their wedding-day. He spoke to us all, who had crowded out into the hall at his clear, ringing tones, but his eyes were looking past every one into the ball-room, where my Esther still stood, like a statue, just as he had left her.

“He turned away, as if he could not bear the sight. ‘Madam,’ he said to me, ‘I cannot ask you to give me your only daughter on the eve of a separation which may be eternal.’

“I could not answer, but Esther answered for me. Stretching out both her hands, she came swiftly down among the silent guests, until she was close beside him. Then she raised her hands suddenly to his neck, and kissed him in the sight of all.

“‘I am yours,’ she said; ‘you cannot give me back, even to my mother.’”

“And so”—prompted Essie.

"I was only the mother, you see," said Lady Everard, sadly smiling—"only the mother who had nursed, and watched, and loved her. So they were married the next morning, of course. I had her with me for a year afterwards, but I never danced again."

"Poor grannie!" said Essie, stroking the slender hand, as she had a pretty way of doing. "It was hard on you. I should like to have seen my pretty mother that night."

"You need not pity me for not dancing," said Lady Everard; "and as for your dear mother, I know she only chose as was natural, and well. I did not grudge her her happiness—I am not such a selfish old woman as all that, Essie—only it seemed hard to me being second, where for seventeen years I had been the first."

"Well, you are first with me," said Esther; "I must make up for all your sorrows."





CHAPTER XVIII.

SILVERDALE.

"This nettle—danger!"

THE morning after grandmamma's story of Mrs. Chester's marriage-day, Esther got a letter. Such a rare and unexpected event with her, that she could hardly believe the fact, even when she saw it with her own eyes, lying on her tray at breakfast-time. Grumphie was there to claim the foreign stamp on his own behalf, and the crest for Chrissie, while the envelope was put aside for the paper-bag. All the children in this house had a mania for collection, and grandmamma used to liken them to a plague of locusts—they had such a way of pouncing down on everything that came into the house. The stamp was a French one, and Essie turned the letter this way and that, up and down, before opening it, wondering who

could be the writer. Then she solved the mystery by tearing open the envelope, and reading the name, "Jeannette Liskeard," at the bottom of the fourth sheet.

Essie's whole face flushed with pleasure. "How kind of her," she said; "a letter all to myself. Go away, Grumphie, and let me read it."

It was a long, amusing letter, dating from Dresden, telling of a difficult tour through France. Whispers of war were in the air, though the declaration had not yet been made, and Paris was ominously still—but there was great difficulty with luggage, and they were all very glad when they were safely over the frontier, and liable to no further stoppages. "Paris is very beautiful," Jeannette wrote; "it seems horrible to think what this war may leave it. My sympathies are French, but of course the Germans will win—might always does. If only the French will stop short of a revolution, Paris itself may never be reached by these Germans." But France could not draw the line, as Jeannette saw, a year later. She let the dregs of her population surge up to the surface, and feed upon herself, until all Paris

was drenched in blood—until her dethroned Emperor came, a conquered man, to end a life that had been of inestimable value to his country in the loneliness and obscurity of a pretty English village. So truly a kingdom divided against itself cannot stand.

At the time that Jeannette wrote, however, there was no talk of a Republic—the country had risen, obedient to the Emperor's proclamation, to make common cause against a common enemy. The red flag was furled, the cap of liberty hidden away—the whole army animated by the cry that was answered so sadly to so many, "À Berlin !"

After that one letter, Jeannette wrote many times—hoping, fearing, as the telegrams pronounced victory or defeat on the brave little army—doing her best too to help the wounded by binding a red cross on her arm, and working for six hours a-day at the making of lint and bandages at the Dresden society. These letters were a great pleasure and excitement to Esther—the telegrams were so exaggerated, or altogether false, that she ceased to read or believe them, and immediate news from the Continent was a perpetual source of excitement. The children

formed a little society among themselves also for the sick and wounded, and many a parcel found its way from the house at No. 5 to the great dépôt in London; but beyond this outside work, there was not much to make these autumn days pass very quickly to Esther.

She was very glad to hear how Jim was succeeding abroad, and growing into a smart, efficient page. He sent Polly a photograph once, taken at a German fair, in his livery, with a very fierce expression on his face, at which she gazed long and earnestly, a little disappointed, amidst all the glory of buttons and cockades, to miss the familiar twinkle of the blue eyes under their thatch of hair. For Jim's hair was rough no longer, but forced into respectable smoothness, and the old merry smile seemed to be fading away. But that might be only the photograph, as Essie remarked consolingly, and Poll took the comfort gratefully.

"I suppose he is growing up," she said, with her wistful smile—wistful, for thinking of the boyhood Jim had lost for ever, when he took to service and foreign parts. "He won't never come back the same." But then which of us comes back, just the same, to the hearts that

weary for us, after twelve months of battle with the world? It may be a cruel world to some people—an ungrateful world perhaps, but our account with it is not all one-sided. We gain something, as the years roll on, for the youth we lose. Looking back, long afterwards, I think we shall see the lessons that the years have taught us stand out distinctly from the surrounding petty details of our daily life—lessons we have failed to learn more terribly distinct still. Mothers and wives and sisters in France learned on their knees, at this time, lessons written in the blood of their dearest, who had gone forth hopefully to victory—to be brought back dead in the first flush of their manhood, perhaps, to the desolate homes that would never be the same again—or to languish in some far-away German fortress, until such time as peace should settle on the land and free the prisoners; and German women, elated with victory, crowning with laurels their undaunted soldiers, had lessons to learn too—lessons of sympathy, and love, and tenderest pity for the stricken hearts amongst them, who had paid away lives dearer to them than their own as part of the price of victory.

After the way in which events had crowded on each other during the last six months, there was a little lull before there was anything very exciting to write and tell Philip—a time of quietness in which Essie began to find her life a little monotonous, and to look wistfully out at the autumn fields, of which she could only get such a far-away view. She did lessons with Miss Agnew still, as she said she might as well improve her mind as do nothing ; but the days seemed long to her, longer than she had ever known them, and only her winning ways prevented them being burdensome to others as well as to herself. But Essie had that rare gift in children which Miss Agnew called tact, but which grandmamma called by its true name of unselfishness. Even if she felt fretful and cross, she was ready with a humorous, quaint remark in answer to Chrissie's gentle sympathy, or with some long story to which Grumphie would listen open-mouthed for hours.

"I get like a machine," she said to him once, "and you wind me up whenever you like."

"I saw a blanet last night," he remarked irrelevantly—then, seeing a faint smile in Essie's eyes, he went on hastily, "I know I

don't say the word quite right, but it's a star what doesn't twinkle."

"Yes, I understand," she said, ruffling up



his pretty hair. "Go on, tell me something more."

"About what?" he asked; "about me and baby yesterday? We climbed up on the kitchen table, and eat a nartychoke."

"Not *really*," cried Essie; "why! I wonder you didn't die."

"Oh! baby couldn't swallow it," he said; "but I did. I didn't like it much," he added, frankly, "but I felt as if I must."

"But you don't know how dangerous it is," said Essie, gravely.

"Oh! but I saw an ostrich eat whole bundles of nails once," explained Grumphie, "and that's ever so much harder. I tried," he said, with a deep sigh, "but I can't *yet*."

"And you won't try again, till you grow into an ostrich, will you?" she said.

And Grumphie promised.

At that moment Polly came to the door to dress him for a walk, and he rose joyously.

"I wish I could come too," said Essie, wistfully; "but never mind, grandmamma will come and amuse me."

"I *don't* mind, really," said Grumphie, quite earnestly.

"I know you do not," she answered, laughing. "So I hope you will look out for news. Promise me, Poll."

"Yes, miss dear, that I will," said Polly.

By this time the October days were drawing

to an end, and the keen feeling of coming winter was sharpening and tempering the sunshine. Essie, lying still, was very glad of a cosy fire all day long, and needed the lamps by six o'clock, for the days were shortening and darkening very fast.

She lay quite idly for a long time after Polly had gone out, watching them from her window rushing about the grass, finding scarlet berries, and late blackberries, and falling acorns. She could hardly believe—it seemed so long since—that, six months ago, she had been bright, eager, active as any of the children—the first in every race—the loudest laughter—the quickest tongue of them all. “And now,” she said to herself, looking back at grannie’s quiet figure in the further corner of the room, “now I am quieter than grannie herself—and I look on and on, until I seem to *live* in the future.”

There was a noise outside that roused her from her reverie—a confused, faint hubbub of voices, that seemed to come from the field behind the house. Essie raised herself on her elbow and looked out. The autumn sunlight was streaming through the leafless trees upon

the hard-worked, hard-featured faces, that were all turned in one direction, towards the gleam of the Silverdale furnaces. There were faces



amongst the crowd that she knew—happy
who had smiled after her from their
floors—children whom she taught in

Sunday school—farm labourers who had always a kindly “good day” for “little miss.” But Essie could hardly have recognised any of those familiar features in the stern, set faces that were tramping hurriedly past.

Her heart beat fast and loudly, as she looked back into the room, where Lady Everard was sitting placidly knitting as usual—the contrast struck her forcibly between this strong, rough mob of honest workmen, and the languid beauty of her own surroundings.

“There is something wrong, grannie,” she said, so suddenly, that Lady Everard started—there is such a rushing, hurrying, quiet crowd going down the road to Silverdale.”

“Ah!” said Lady Everard, looking up with sudden interest, “I forgot to tell you that I heard there had been an accident last night in the pit.”

“Oh! grannie,” cried Essie; “I am so sorry you forgot. Tell me more.”

“Nobody knows much,” said grandmamma. “Some blocks of coal fell in, and there was an escape of gas. All who could, got away; but it seems there are five men missing.”

“And can nobody help them?” said Essie,

arousing herself, and turning her large, eager eyes on Lady Everard's face. "Do they think they are dead?"

"They cannot tell," said Lady Everard. "A party of men have been down all night, with the manager, and they dug out fifteen men. No one can be got to penetrate to the place where the explosion was. You see, Essie, they are most of them men with wives and families, and it means almost certain death."

"But somebody ought to go," said Essie, her heart beating, and her blood tingling at the thought. "Oh! if Tom were here—if Tom were only here!"

"Tom who?" asked Lady Everard, startled.

"Tom M'Dougal."

"Oh! some one told me he had been sent for early this morning—they have great confidence in him, it seems."

"I should think so," said Essie; "Polly says there is no one like him."

Meanwhile Polly and the children were being drifted along in the wake of the ever-increasing crowd—toiling, hurrying, stumbling over the rough ground to Silverdale. It was a curious crowd—men with agricultural implements in

their hands, as they had gone from their work—farmers in their carts, the doctor in his gig, and women with shawls tied over their heads, and children clutching at their gowns, going, open-eyed but silently, where the men led—some with a living interest in the tragedy being enacted at this minute “down to Silverdale”—some prompted by neighbourly sympathy—some by mere curiosity to see the end, whatever it might be.

For a terrible catastrophe had fallen, twenty-four hours ago, upon the busy, prosperous village—a catastrophe which only those who have lived in the vicinity of coal-pits can fully comprehend. The dreary waiting for husbands and sons, until tea-time is well over—the standing at the doors anxiously, with raised hands shielding the dazzled eyes, which look out over the well-known path for the well-known figure—the news of an accident telegraphed from the pits an hour later—then terror, confusion, dismay, that has time to increase and multiply fourfold, through the dreary tramp for that seven miles to the pit’s mouth. Once there, there is nothing to be done—nothing, at least, for the women to

occupy themselves with—they can only loiter on the outskirts of the busy band of men, who go down in turns to the terrible darkness below—hoping, fearing, despairing as the night darkens, and the stars come out, and there is still no hope of finding the imprisoned men alive.

Morning dawns at last, greyly and sadly, with autumn mists clouding the sunrise; but these all sweep away by six o'clock, the light blazing gloriously out over the whole awakened earth. The birds twitter in their nests, such of them as are still left in chilly England. The dew rustles softly down off the laden branches, the spiders' webs hang in silver threads from tree to tree. But those tired men, those silent women, notice nothing of this glorious outburst of another day into life and beauty—they only know that their labour has been in vain—that hope is almost over. Into the quiet dawn a man comes up, dazzled at first by the sudden light—the women press to the front in a solemn silence, looking up with wan, supplicating eyes into his work-worn face. They need no answer to the unspoken question hovering on their lips—they slink away again like

wounded animals, as they read it in his averted head and pitiful gestures. "Only the fifteen," a woman says hoarsely; and he echoes, "Only the fifteen saved."

Polly had to turn back very soon, for the children could not manage the seven miles, and, when she reached home, Essie called her into her room, and bade her shut the door.

"Have you been to Silverdale?" she asked anxiously.

"No, Miss Essie"—with surprise in her rounded eyes—"there was the children, you know."

"Yes, of course," said Essie, impatiently; "then you have not heard the news?"

"About the accident, Miss Essie?" said Polly, puzzled. "It's just a fearsome thing—five men still down, and no one to venture nigh them. Tom should be here."

"Then you *hadn't* heard," said Essie. "I said just the same words as that, then grannie told me; but Tom is coming, Poll—that is my news."

Polly turned away and leant upon the window sill, with her eyes hidden.

Once she moaned slightly, and when Essie

stretched out a hand and touched her gently, she said, with quivering lips, "Tom's just sure to go down, Miss Esther, and it may mean certain death."

She had been the first to see that Tom's place was here, just because, all her life, she had been in the habit of turning instinctively to him at any threatening of difficulty or danger; but when the possibility faced her, and she realised what it might mean, she shrank from it, and half withdrew her wish. "There's others might do as well," she said at last—"others that are not quite what our lad is to us."

Then Essie's courage reassured her. "Don't fret, Poll," she said. "He may not go down at all, and if he does, he may not die—and even if the worst came," said Essie, speaking in a low, awestruck voice, "it would be a grand thing—worthy of Tom even."

"Ah! yes, miss dear," said Polly, "that it would. But what would we do without our Tom at home—and me not to see him once?"

"Poor Polly," said Essie. Having no more comfort to offer, she gave her sympathy, and they two sat on together, almost silently, until

the twilight came, and with it a note that Miss Agnew brought straight up to Essie—a short note written by the curate on the leaf of his pocket-book—"The men all up. Tom M'Dougal dead. Will you tell his sister?"

.

I must take you back to the pit first, however, and to the work going on there.

By one o'clock the crowd had gathered round the mouth of the pit, and were standing in an awestruck silence, while the cage went up and down, carrying fresh tools and fresh men to the little company below. The manager was down himself, working like the meanest labourer, fighting for those five men against the destroying elements—but no one had courage to penetrate into the furthest tunnel of all, where the first explosion had been. The curate, a young man, who was known and loved in the poorest homes of Silverdale, wandered about amongst the crowd restlessly, seeking for volunteers. He knew too little of the mines himself, to make it possible for him to try and reach that blocked-up passage alone.

Every time the cage came up, there were eager questions, short answers, a great pressing

and pushing to the front; and every time it was lost to sight, with its burden of men with rough, steadfast faces, every one who could get near enough peered down after it into the gloom below.

"Have you heard nought?" some one asked; and the man who had come up last, exhausted, shook his head in silence.

There was a young and haggard woman sitting on the outskirts of the crowd, with her face buried in her apron, crying aloud. She had a little baby crawling at her feet, and whenever the tiny creature had a chance, it crept away among the crowd close to the pit's mouth, and was brought back by some of the men watching there, laughing and crowing with delight. This woman lifted her head now, and asked, almost fiercely, "Are you all afraid to go nigh the place where my man is?"

There was no answer.

"He is alive maybe," she went on, raising her voice, and standing suddenly upright. "As there is a God in heaven, He will judge you." She broke out into passionate weeping again, and the man who had come up put his hand upon her shoulder compassionately.

"Why, lass," he said, "would you have us risk ten lives for five?"

"Yes, I would," she answered fiercely.

There was another woman sitting quite alone in the background, knitting—a quiet woman, with smooth hair banded down over a somewhat wrinkled face, and with strong, helpful hands, in whose hold the needles clicked steadily. She made no motion forward with the swaying crowd—never raised her head or spoke—but she sat in the golden sunlight, knitting.

But when hope had almost died out, and nothing new been heard, there was a sound of wheels on the hard road, and the doctor's gig drew up again. A young man who had been driving, jumped out, and threw the reins to the groom. "I've brought her a good pace, doctor," he said; "she'd better be walked about a bit," and then he took off his coat, and hung it on a rail.

"I'm going down to see how matters stand," he said; "who volunteers?"

The men hung back, but some one shouted, "There's folks down there, Master M'Dougal, and has been all night."

"Why, of course there are," said Tom cheerily. "Don't I know better than most men where to look for courage; but I'm going beyond *them*—will anyone come?"

The men shook their heads, and slunk away. They were no cowards, these rough honest working men, but they knew too well the danger before them, and the small hope of helping those below.

Some one came quietly through their midst, however, and grasped Tom's hand—a slight, wiry young man, who hung his coat over the railings also, and threw his hat to the ground.

"I have no wife," he said. "I'm your man."

There was a murmur of satisfaction round the pit, and a faint cheer, as the pleasant, handsome face rose above the crowd, and there was a cry from some one—"God bless our parson." Then the ropes were set, and they were ready.

Tom stood with his hat in his hand, looking round with his pleasant, kindly eyes at the crowded faces, half eager, half ashamed, and smiled back a good-bye. His glance took in the poor sobbing wife, who had risen, with her

little baby clutched to her breast, and was staring with open, terrified eyes ; he saw, too, the other quiet woman in the background, who had risen also, dropping her knitting to the ground, and was looking straight up to Heaven, with her hands clasped before her. The curate touched Tom's shoulder, and pointed to her. "She looks like a picture of Faith," he said, and his eyes lingered on her.

And then the ropes were loosed, the shouts died away, and they two were alone together.

To the anxious watchers on the bank, the two hours they waited seemed a lifetime—then the signal was given from below, the cage began its slow ascent, and a murmur rose through the crowd.

"It's parson," they said, as they moved forward to clutch at and drag out the young man, who swayed forward perilously as he stepped out. "Never mind me," he said, "take them out."

In an awful silence they took out the two men who were lying in the cage with their faces covered, and the doctor was down on his knees in a minute, doing what he could for them, while the curate drank some brandy

eagerly. "Give me some to take down," he said. "We've found them."

"Dead?" said a shrill woman's voice behind.

"No, thank God," he said; "if we can get them up in time."

"What's the danger, sir?" some one asked curiously.

"Oh, there's an awful escape of gas—almost impossible to get through. M'Dougal did it—and the water rising."

"Ah!" There was a low moan from the women gathered into dejected groups—not a woman there but knew what that meant. There was a hundred volunteers now in place of the one before, but the young man was firm. "No good risking more lives," he said, and for the second time he went down from the light of day alone. In ten minutes the second signal came, and one man was lifted out of the gloom into the quiet sunshine—lying majestically still—dead—a young lad with brown hair, and brown eyes, and a lingering smile about his lips—the smile he had worn, it seemed, when he said good-bye to his mother yesterday morning.

At the third signal there came up another

dead man, another living one, and the curate ! He was faint again, and had to take more brandy before he could speak, but the cage had gone down, in the meantime, for M'Dougal.

"He would not come," the young man said passionately, "and the water was to our waists. What was my life to his ? For God's sake stand aside !"

As no signal came, they wound up the cage, and three men sprang into it in silence. In five minutes the signal sounded feebly, and they began their work. The cage came up so slowly that the curate, kneeling on the edge, and peering over, saw nothing at all for some long minutes—then, dimly, he discerned the three men standing in it with their heads uncovered, and at their feet a straight, still figure, soaked and stiff, that they laid silently down in the sunshine.

There was nothing to be done—nothing to be tried. He who had saved so many—who had done his duty bravely against fearful odds, had found his reward. It was for this that he had "give up everything" a year ago—for this he had worked and striven for twenty-eight long years—for this he had once lain, a

little helpless child, upon a happy mother's knee.

And now he lay serenely silent, side by side, with those other two whom he had tried to save, and the quiet woman with grey hair, who had laid white handkerchiefs over those two dead faces, knelt beside them in the sunlight, tearlessly.

"Let her be," the people said in whispers. "God's ways seem hard sometimes; her man and the lad both gone—and she the mother of ten!"

While the pretty woman, with her baby clasped to her breast, looked up with tearful smiles into her husband's young bright face, and said, over and over again, "Let me touch you, John, to be certain you are safe. I can scarce believe it."

And the woman who had looked like a picture of Faith knelt by her bed that night on which the three lay still—a woman with a broken heart.

So in the twilight Polly read the few words scrawled in the curate's pocket-book, over Essie's shoulder, and then she turned away shuddering.

"What can I do without him?" that was her perpetual cry at first, as she sat for the long hours of the evening, with her face hidden at the foot of Essie's bed, dry-eyed and shivering; and Essie could only sob brokenly for answer, in sympathy with this tearless grief that frightened her.

"If he had only said good-bye," Polly moaned, by-and-by, "I could bear it better—but to go without one word."

"It was so grand," said Essie tearfully, casting about for some word of comfort. "Mr. Foulis says that the men will always remember his face as it looked when he went down. He had taken off his hat, and was smiling. He seemed to look at them all separately—it was a sort of good-bye, Polly, to everything."

"Only not to me," said Polly, with a long breath. "Never mind me, Miss Essie. I'm off my head like to-night. Will you say my prayers for me? I don't seem to feel, somehow, as if I could miss out his name."

So Essie began the Lord's Prayer softly in the dark, and Polly, kneeling by the bed, joined in presently, and went on steadily to the end.

“For ever and ever, Amen.” A silence fell upon them as that thought of a grand eternity flashed upon both these narrow childish minds. Essie drew back the curtain, and looked out at the stars. Polly broke out into passionate weeping. “He is in heaven, Miss Essie,” she said; “and it isn’t so very far away neither, is it? God bless our Tom!”





CHAPTER XIX.

A SPRAY OF CYPRESS.

"Thus, love in life should strive to see
Sometimes what love in death would be."

"**D**EAR PHILIP,—I can hardly write straight, even yet, because of my tears, but I must tell you about Tom. I have waited until after the funeral on purpose, so that I could write about everything at once, and the only thing I wish is that you could have been here too, to see how grandly it was all done.

"You saw about his going down into the pit, and all that, from the paper I sent you, and how well Mr. Foulis behaved too—all the people here are wild about it—but poor Tom gets nothing at all ; at least all the fuss about him now can't do him any good. He lay all this week in Mrs. Flynn's cottage (you remember the woman who washed for us once),

because her husband and her son had both been killed too, and people sent the most lovely flowers for wreaths and crosses—the coffins



were quite *covered* to-day. You know the townspeople are going to pay all the expenses,

and they have done it beautifully. The coffins were of oak, carried each by twelve miners. They are buried, side by side, in the old cemetery, under the pine-tree, next to grand-papa, and the monument is to be unhewn granite—the inscription Mr. Foulis is to choose.

“Polly went to the funeral with Chrissie and Miss Agnew, but none of the others came up from Milford, and I just watched from the window. There were thousands of people, and the shops were shut all through the town.

“Good-bye, I hear tea coming—so no more from

“Your loving sister,

“ESTHER CHESTER.”

Such was the account of the funeral that Essie sent to Philip. It was certainly a very grand and solemn sight, for the tragic event had excited a wide and universal sympathy. All week, while the three men lay in Mrs. Flynn's inner room, the neighbours flocked in hourly, to cry, and look, and whisper to each other of their sudden death. But to Mrs.

Flynn herself nobody spoke much. She was a quiet, reserved woman, who, if she had made no enemies, had certainly gained few friends—so, in her grief, she was as utterly alone as she had been in her joys and sorrows for the seven years she had lived amongst them. Mr. Foulis came, day by day, to talk to her, and comfort her, if possible; but he would go away with a hushed and awestruck feeling, as if he had been up somewhere beyond the reach of the waves of this troublesome world. This woman, whose grand, beautiful face had struck him once as an image of Faith—showed him *that* faith now by her works. She was not fretful, or murmuring, or rebellious—but she took her cross with hands still strong, although they trembled, and carried it steadily. She—the mother of ten, as the neighbours had said pitifully when the blow first fell—took the comfort of those left to her aching heart, and was content to wait.

When the evening shadows fell, and the neighbours went soberly away, Mrs. Flynn would bring her lamp, and sit for the long hours of the night beside the bed on which lay her husband and her eldest born, and the lad

who had given his life so willingly for others. She could not bear to feel that these bodies she had loved so dearly should lie lonely and neglected, even though they were far beyond the reach of such tender love. When she knelt and stretched her hands out over the bed with an unspoken prayer for peace, she felt as if God heard and answered her, through those restful, quiet faces, on which the flickering lamplight fell.

Later on, when, one night, heavy feet tramped, carefully hushed, into the little room, Mrs. Flynn, knowing what that solemn sound meant, crept away to the little garret chamber, and, with her weary arm upon the window sill, gave forth one exceeding bitter cry for help, that God heard and answered again through the living, loving voices of her living children.

So the husband of her youth and her first-born son were hidden away under coffin lids, and until the day of judgment no earthly woe could ever reach them any more—and Mrs. Flynn rose up from her nightly vigil, and came down amongst her clamorous children, sweet and serene as ever, hiding her pas-

sionate loving heart away under her usual manner.

The neighbours called her cold and forgetful, and left her alone very much as they had done before, because they thought her ungrateful for their outspoken sympathy; but her children, rising up in after years to bless her self-forgetful life, had no need to call her cold. Mr. Foulis, catching the occasional smile that was sadder than tears, sweeter than praise, called her a grand woman; while Essie, who knew and loved Mrs. Flynn, would resent almost fiercely any stone cast upon her by the villagers.

On the day of the funeral all the neighbours locked their doors, and shut their shops, and lined the road, a dense, solemn crowd, from Mrs. Flynn's cottage door to the cemetery gates.

At eleven o'clock the twelve miners who were appointed to carry each coffin went into the little back room, and came slowly out into the road. The day was beautiful and sunny, and as the sad procession wound up between that living lane, hands were outstretched to lay wreaths and crosses and loose

flowers upon the polished oak coffins. It was a strange and solemn sight to see some woman, perhaps, step forward, sobbing, and shyly lay down her offering upon the coffin—sobbing not so much from sympathy with these sudden deaths, as with a terrible fear of what might some day come nearer to herself, and touch her own home. That was the worst, you see. It was a thing that might happen to them all any day in this uncertain life. So women pressed up closer to their husbands, with the babies' faces lying on their shoulder, and looked with wistful eyes after the receding procession that had nearly reached the cemetery gates.

Suddenly, a loud shrill cry rang out, and up, it seemed, to the very gate of heaven. The procession did not stop, but every head was turned back to the widow's cottage, from whence the voice had come. Mrs. Flynn, who had been standing erect in the doorway, had moved away, and was kneeling on the step, with a little curly head pressed to her aching heart.

"It's the little un," neighbours said pitifully, "father's pet."

“Poor little lad,” said one and another tearfully. “Take un away, missus.”

Then they fell in, two and two, behind the mourners, and moved on, a dark and sombre line, through the village street, leaving the mother and her children alone.





CHAPTER XX.

HOW THE TALE WAS TOLD IN MILFORD.

"Memory's golden chain."

DOWN in the fisherman's cottage in Milford the week had gone very slowly. The blind had been drawn in the untidy kitchen, and Mrs. M'Dougal had left her washing very often, to sob over "our lad," and fondle the baby more than usual—but work had to be done through it all, or custom would fail, so she went wearily about the house all day, crying to herself, as she wrung out the clothes and hung them in the sun, while the old man sat moodily in the doorway.

"'Good-bye, mother, I'll be back to-morrow,' those were his very words," she told the neighbours, who came in to listen and condole.

"Eh, dear! but it'll be many a long to-morrow before he comes," they answered, with

solemn shakes of the head ; and they said to one another as they sauntered home, after a word to the old man—"And the lad gone first, after all. Well ! it do seem hard."

That Saturday evening, when Mrs. M'Dougal had finished washing, and had put the fretful baby to bed, she took the letter that Mr. Foulis had written, and, kneeling by her husband's chair, read it aloud to him.

Old, silly, infirm as he was, she came to him instinctively in her trouble.

"Oh ! my man, my man," she wailed. "Our Tom, that we were so proud on ! do you mind his pretty ways as a little lad ? do you mind how good he was always ? and he gone !"

"Gone to glory," said the old man, with a sudden flash of intellect. "It had best have been me, Martha—best have been me."

Perhaps because his helplessness smote her suddenly with pity—perhaps because the unspoken thought in her heart had been put into words, she flung her weary work-worn arms about him, and clung to him.

"Wait awhile !" she cried softly, all the bitterness of many hard years dying out of her

voice. "I can't spare you yet—only, when God wills, you'll go to the lad."

"Our little Tom," said the old man, sinking feebly back, "and he to be gone to glory first."

Mr. Foulis's letter was kind and simple—written for the simple people who had lost so much in this eldest son. They had never thought, for a minute, of the possibility of travelling up to Staffordshire for the funeral—that "Good-bye, mother," on Tuesday morning was Tom's farewell—words that should ring in Mrs. M'Dougal's ears like a knell through all carking cares of her daily life. The neighbours down here at Milford, who had known the lad since he was a baby, were "put about," as they phrased it, by his sudden death—by the fact too that he had had no time for a last word to anyone. Poor people have a love of "scenes." They like their loved ones to pass away amongst a crowd of sobbing witnesses, after fluttering farewells, and words of penitence and prayer. This going without one word is terrible to those who have so little time for demonstrative affection through their lives—they want some assurance, at the end, of the love that has been hidden away. But though we all crave

for this proof perhaps, more or less, surely the lives themselves, silent though they may have been, will rise to comfort us, after the greater silence of death shall have fallen on them.

Tom's prosaic life had been an example and a shining light, that they mostly only recognised now, by reason of the darkness that fell when the light went out. Down in Milford, the young men idling at street corners had been wont to hush their profane and foolish words as M'Dougal passed. "It wasn't his way," they said. The children would run beside him down the village to help him carry his nets, and be rewarded by his kind smile and merry jests. In his own home he was the centre round which the other atoms revolved. It was he who read of an evening the words of promise and hope to the old foolish man—it was he who made Mrs. M'Dougal rest while he hung out her washing in the sun—who helped Martin with his books, and rocked the baby's cradle with one foot whilst he mended the nets. When anything went wrong, they all said first, "Where is Tom?" When anything was wanted, some one was sure to say, "Tom will do it."

And this was the life that to Tom himself

was narrow and uncongenial—he called it “plodding along,” and doing his duty only ; but having once chosen it, he put his future aside, and never owned himself unsuited, even to his own heart.

So to some observant eyes his duty took the form of heroism, and his life became a daily, hourly sacrifice.

There are many lives like this—heroic, noble, self-forgetting—among the very poor. Genius crippled for want of space—talents misapplied—Pegasus in pound ; but the day will come—do we not all believe it ?—when this higher part of so many discordant lives will stand unfettered, beyond the petty jarring worries of this daily life—when genius shall shine through eyes long dimmed by weeping, and talents shall find their proper groove ; it may be in this life, or in the life where this world’s wrongs are righted.

So that Saturday passed over at the cottage, with the neighbours dropping in for kindly, tearful discourses, with the children sobered by the unusual Sabbath stillness ; and at the end of the day Mrs. M’Dougal drew up the shabby blind again to let in the mellow sunlight, and went to her work with dry eyes,

and hard lines about her mouth. People who work for their living have no time for fancies or troubles—have hardly time for sorrow itself, until it stands like an angel in the way, and bars their progress.

The Angel had been there, for a little while,



with his drawn sword laid over the threshold of the cottage, and the very children felt his nameless presence in the house.

Martin did his sums quicker than usual, and “redded up a bit for mother.” Annie put her book aside, to play with the children in the

afternoon ; while the baby itself seemed to feel the gentle influence.

But the Angel sheathed his sword again by-and-by, and stepped aside out of the busy woman's busy life—lingering longest, perhaps—or at least so it seemed—with the old man, who sat for hour after hour in the sunshine at the creaky door, muttering to himself about the glory of the world to come.

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But that day seemed, somehow, to be a turning-point in the lives at the cottage, and, after it, things grew gradually but steadily brighter. It seemed as if the reward of Tom's works was following him even beyond this life. Money was collected in Staffordshire to set up a stone to the memory of the three men, and what was over was divided amongst the two families that had lost their breadwinners. But Mrs. Flynn, who had a little money of her own, and five sons to work for her, brought her share up to Esther, and begged to have it all sent to Tom M'Dougal's mother.

"Send it from me," she said, with the slow tears coursing down her cheeks. "It is mine now, to do what I like with, and she needs it

more than I do." So the money, amounting in all to about £70, was sent down to Milford, and the prosperity of the M'Dougal family began. Both Jim and Polly were earning good wages and their keep—"were out in the world"—in that world which seems so partial in its favours, so impartial in its suffering and misery. Polly grew older rapidly from the day Tom died—grew into a handy, quiet little maiden, and shot up into a healthier, rosier girlhood than her sickly childhood had promised. As for Jim, he steadied a little, as people are apt to do as they get on in their teens, but he was reckless, daring, and most lovable to the end of his days, with an irresistible twinkle in his keen blue eyes. He was devotedly attached to the Liskeard family, and to Miss Jeannette in particular; but she never took the place in his heart where Esther was enshrined. Years afterwards, when the family were living in London, and Esther, a grown-up young lady, was going to be presented at Court, he saw her again, for the first time since the Milford days. Her carriage was at the door, and a little crowd had collected round the powdered footmen, with their

immense bouquets. Colonel Chester had come home from India by this time, with his wife, and grandmamma had brought them all up to London for the season, in her pride in the beauty of her grand-daughter, which she had never seen. So the crowd gathered and waited until the hall door was thrown open, and Essie stood upon the threshold—a picture of youth and health and happiness. Her cheeks were round, and flushed just now to a pretty pink—her eyes were soft and clear, her lips smiling.

She was like the Essie of former days, and yet different—gentler, softer, more womanly—you could see that in the way she turned in the doorway to the satellites who stood round admiringly. All the family had come down to see her off. Colonel Chester, in uniform, was handing her out with loving gallantry—nurse was holding up her train—Polly was on her knees, stitching a loose flower into its place.

Mrs. Chester—a still young and pretty woman—with darker eyes and darker hair than her tall, slim daughter, was standing in the background, with her hand in Lady Everard's.

She was not going to Court herself, for she

was very fragile, and the crowd and heat frightened her.

So Esther made her triumphal progress, down the carpeted steps, between the ranks of idlers, and looking to right and left, with happy eyes, she caught sight of a figure taller than the rest—a young man in livery, with red hair, and eyes that lingered on her with a look of recognition.

Essie stopped short, and turned—the crowd, following her eyes, turned also, and confronted the young man with red hair, who was blushing furiously. Essie dropped her father's hand, and held out her own, all white-gloved as it was, with one word, "Jim." Then the gaping crowd parted, and Jim touched his cap, and walked up to her.

"Miss Essie," he said; "I thought it were you. I'm right down glad to see you!"

"I have not seen you for five years," said Essie—"a lifetime!—not since Tom——"

She looked suddenly at Jim, whose eyes had darkened and dimmed at the sound of the long unused name. The one hero of poor Jim's life was a hero of her own too, and her lips quivered, as she stood for a minute looking

straight at the lad. Then she put out her hand to Colonel Chester again. "Go and see Polly," she said with a faint, sweet smile, "she will be so glad."

So the carriage drove off, amidst the murmured comments of the self-constituted judges, who wondered for long after why the young lady's brilliant eyes had been dimmed so suddenly when the young man with red hair had come face to face with her.





CHAPTER XXI.

AT LAST.

"How easy it is to forgive those we love."

WE must go back again those five years, however, to Essie, lying on her sofa, before Colonel Chester and his wife were at home again—before there was any talk, in the tranquil household, of London gaities and dissipations for the child Esther—childish even for her thirteen years. Indeed there were some points in Essie's character that had something childlike in them to the end of her days.

All through those short November days that followed her letter, Essie was looking forward impatiently to Christmas and the holidays.

Phil had not much more of the gift of a ready writer than falls to the lot of most schoolboys, and his epistles were slight and unsatisfactory:

but there was something in them—in their tone and strange humility—that touched Essie deeply, having almost forgotten, as she had resolutely set herself to do, the episode of the last holidays.

“Poor Phil,” she would say to herself occasionally, as she folded up his notes and laid them away amongst her treasures. “I am glad he is fond of me.” She was glad that the barrier he had raised between them for a while by his cowardly silence was partially destroyed, although that one word had never been spoken. So she answered his letters, in her rambling, amusing fashion, with Grumphy’s last piece of mischief, the last bit of local gossip, and her own plans for the far-away future, when she should be quite well. She would write of that possible future without a quiver of the lip, or the fading for an instant of her courageous smile; but in Philip’s ears the words would ring for days afterwards reproachfully—and all the time that Essie was watching, waiting, working for him, a great resolve was growing gradually in Philip’s heart, that was to bear fruit by-and-by.

So Essie made straw frames for the photo-

graphs in his room, as a surprise, and knitted him comforters for the coming winter, finding the days long and tedious, unconscious that the germs of good that she, at least, had always recognised in Philip's heart, were springing into life at last.

There is an old story of a pebble dropped into a well, with ripples circling out to the farthest limits of its waters. So Tom's noble deed had fallen into the midst of all these quiet, uneventful lives, and widened the ripples round, until it touched even Philip's secret sin, and moved him to speak out openly once for all, even if it should be at the cost of Esther's sisterly love. We never know how or where our influence ends—how our slightest acts may be just the feather in the scale of some doubting mind to give it weight in the right direction. Tom would never have believed that that one act of his was to influence all Philip Chester's after life.

But the righting of a wrong in our own way is harder than we think. Philip's way was to go direct and blindly to the point—not waiting to think or to retract.

"He would go straight to Essie's room," he

thought, "the instant he reached the house, and tell her the truth in everything, taking the consequences bravely." So when the station was reached, he put his luggage on a fly, and walked on himself, so that he might creep in quietly and unobserved. But, once at home, his first disappointment met him in the shape of Chrissie, radiant, on the doorstep, flying down to greet him joyfully.

"I was at the nursery window," she said. "I saw you such a long way off. Grumphie thought you were the grocer, but I knew you. I am so glad you have come."

So she carried this poor, disconcerted prodigal indoors, in a perfect whirl of love and excitement, and was too happy to notice how the brighter, braver look on the boy's face became sullen again, as he saw his visions of confession and repentance fading away.

They were all round about him in an instant, like flies round honey—Grumphie clinging to his legs, nurse leaning over the banisters. "Here he is," cried Chrissie, dragging him into the drawing-room, an unwilling victim. "He has come home, grandmamma, at last."

Grandmamma put out her gentle old hands

and stroked his face. "Are you glad to be home, my dear?" she said. "I have been listening for your cab's wheels."

"I walked," said Philip, gruffly.

He could have cried from vexation at this sudden failure of his hopes and plans—he could have pushed the children away, and dashed up to his own room—but it was all impossible, and only Miss Agnew saw the darkening face and heard the impatient tones.

"Come up to Essie," she said, coming quietly to the rescue. "The children will tear you limb from limb."

But even she could not think why her words called up that sudden flush over the sunburnt face.

This was his second disappointment. He had pictured this scene to himself so often lately—Essie's quiet, pretty room—her bright, loving face turned towards him—her eager hands outstretched—stillness and semi-darkness. It was all so different from this clamorous cavalcade conducting him upstairs—Grumphy throwing open the door—Chrissie still clinging to him—both children announcing him at once with upraised voices.

The room was not dim even, as it generally was in the twilight. In honour of his arrival, Poll had closed the shutters earlier than usual, and lit all the jets of gas—the fire lit up everything into the farthest corner—only Essie's face rose familiar, bright and excited, from the heaped-up pillows.

“Dear Phil! dear Phil! at last.”

There was no wistful entreaty in her eyes now—no yearning for an unspoken word—only a great and tender love that thrilled through those who were standing by, and made a mist of tears in Miss Agnew's eyes.

“How are you now?” asked Philip, so abruptly and oddly, that Chrissie stared at him amazed.

In truth he was standing, an awkward sullen figure, with Essie's hand in his, remembering dimly words he had learnt by heart to say to her when they met. Why is it that we wrong ourselves so often by saying the things furthest from our thoughts, and in the higher or lower key to that which makes a chord? Why does the music jar sometimes and go out of tune? Why do we work at cross purposes with each other so often?

When Philip made his low abrupt remark, Essie did not loose his hand, but her eyes clouded for an instant, before she looked up to answer brightly that she was better. "I shall get well," she said.

But Philip turned away without one word in answer.

"I thought he would have been glad," said poor Essie, later on, with her head on Miss Agnew's shoulder, to hide the dropping tears.

"He *is* glad," answered Miss Agnew, boldly. "Wait, Essie, I am always right."

But even to loyal Esther it was a struggle to believe that Annie could be right in this one thing. Philip, in his disappointment, was so quiet and absent-minded to-night, that the evening, with its little festivities in honour of his arrival, felt very tame. He could not show an interest in Jeremy, or the stuffed rook that Grumphie firmly believed ate crumbs and grass, and was, therefore, a less anxiety than the green frog with its hankering after unattainable flies. He was so much more odd, and abrupt, and quiet than usual, that Chrissie was quite unhappy, and said once bitterly—

"You might just as well have been at school."

"Oh, Chris!" said Essie, with a quick flush in her soft cheeks.

"Let grandmamma tell us a story," said Miss Agnew, coming to the rescue again.

"Tell him about Tom," said Chrissie. "Do you know that Tom's grave is under the great tree, close to grandpapa's."

"Have you ever seen an angel, Phil?" asked Grumphie, gravely.

"No," said Philip.

"Oh! we have," said the child eagerly; "Chrissie and me. Tom were an angel, when we went to see him. Angels don't have wings from the very beginning, Phil."

There was a moment's silence, then Chrissie said, "That was not his soul, Grumphie—only his body."

"Why, it was *Tom*," cried Grumphie, scornfully; "do you think I'd never seen him."

"It was his body," persisted Chrissie.

"I know," said Grumphie.

"Your grandfather always liked that place," said Lady Everard, gently; "it had such a lovely view. I remember one evening in

summer we were walking in the cemetery, he and I, and he chose that spot under the tree to be buried in. 'Where the sun shines,' he said, 'and it will be bright and pleasant for you, sweetheart.' You know," said grandmamma, with a pretty pink colour rising to her old cheeks, "that your grandfather always called me so, when first we married."

"Poor grannie," said Essie, smoothing the hand that lay on her pillow.

"I can't move my ears, and squint at the same time," said Grumphie, suddenly. "See!"

"I should hope not," said Miss Agnew.

"For goodness sake, don't try," cried Essie.

Grandmamma was rambling on, unconscious of the interruption.

"I like to feel you children all about me," she said; "and in this house too—it takes me back to my younger days, when your mother was little Esther to me, and our neighbour's little son used to come and play in the sunshine with her. Such plays, Grumphie! I remember their spending a whole day once in trying to make the ducks march down to take their food to the tune of 'Auld langsyne,' played on a penny whistle. Sidney was always in

mischief—always the first in a scrape, and the first out of it again ; but if they were quiet for an hour, we always knew that our little girl was telling some of her pretty stories, to which Sidney was quite content to listen.”

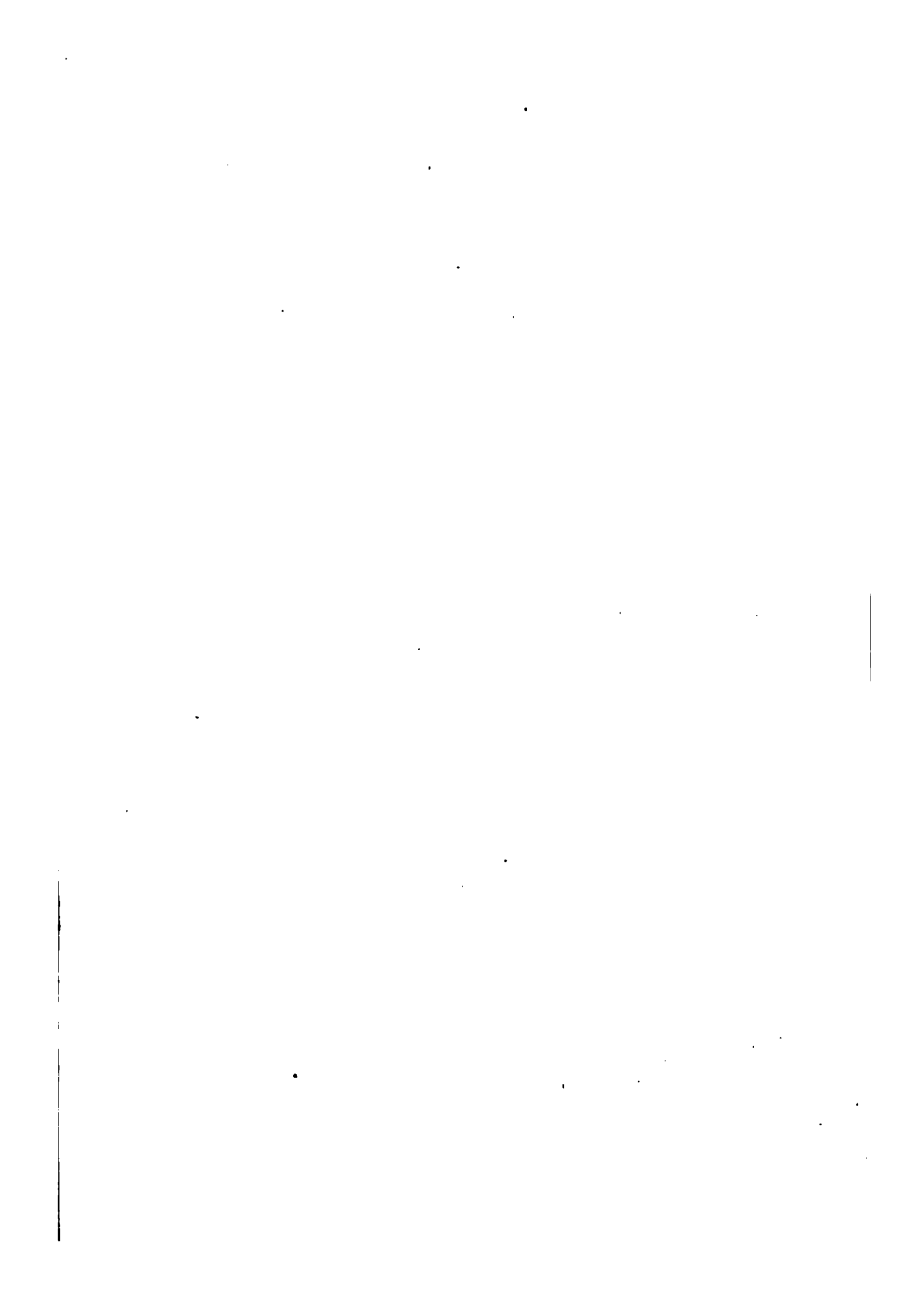
“ Did he teach the ducks ? ” asked Grumphie, unwisely making himself an object of interest in the family circle.

“ Well ! I should think not,” said Lady Everard ; “ but do you know, Grumphie, that it is nine o’clock ? What does Miss Agnew say about bedtime ? ”

Philip had sat for the last hour in a sort of horrid dream. Every time his mind came back to the droning of Lady Everard’s voice, he felt as if he should scream, or get up and stamp about the room. He sat with his elbows on the table, and his eyes half-closed, taking furtive glances at Essie’s restless face, until it must have been photographed on his brain ; but his opportunity for speech had not come yet, and it maddened him. He saw no punishment in it, only disappointment—and this latter is so much the hardest to bear ; and yet it was all a punishment—the waiting, and interruptions, and barrier between him and Essie ; but



FEEDING THE DUCKS



just when the probation was nearly over, he grew impatient, and again took the matter into his own hands.

"Good-night," he said suddenly; "I think I shall go to bed too."

"There is a good example for you, Grumphy," said Lady Everard. "I was just going to propose a general move—it is nine o'clock, and you have all had a tiring day—and I have letters I want Miss Agnew to write for me. I thought," she said, turning smiling to Philip, "that you might have liked a little talk with Essie after we had gone; but you are quite right, sleep is the best thing for you, and you can talk to-morrow."

She drew down his face and kissed it, and he found himself escorted up to his room again by the clamorous children. He had accepted his adverse fate too easily.

But an hour afterwards, when the early household had quieted down, and the doors were shut, and the gas turned low in Essie's room, Philip was not in bed, but was still sitting by his open window, unconscious that the drizzling rain was taking the curl out of his hair. He had sat there for a long time

with his elbows resting on the sill, when he noticed for the first time a stream of light coming from the window beneath, and making a distinct line across the lawn and the bushes ; he leant further out, and looked down—the light came from Essie's window, of which the shutters had been left a chink apart.

Then grandmamma had not come up to bed—the light was not out—there was still time. He slipped off his shoes, and opened his door—everything was dark and still—so dark, that his own figure reflected in the square of light caused by the opening of his own door startled him—so still, that the ticking of the clocks sounded like minute guns.

He looked over the banisters into the hall beneath. The gas in the lowest passage was still alight, but no sound came up. Miss Agnew was still writing for Lady Everard.

He went downstairs on tiptoe, scared by the creaking that followed each footfall, until he stood listening at Essie's door.

Before he knocked, he heard her frightened voice—"Who is there? Come in."

So he turned the handle and entered.

The gas was dim, the fire had burned down,

the room was quiet. This was the room of his imaginatio — and this white figure, sitting up in bed, with arms stretched out to him, was the Esther of his dream.

“Philip, I am so glad. Come to me,” she said.

And Philip went stumbling amongst the unfamiliar chairs and tables to the bedside, but he did not touch her hand, or look into her smiling eyes—he stood with his head bent, facing her.

“Turn up the gas,” said Esther again. “Do you want me, Philip? Look up!”

“I don’t want a light,” said Philip, nervously. I want to tell you something, Essie. I have been wanting to tell you all this half—about—about my gun.”

“Stop!” cried Essie suddenly. “Kiss me, Phil—kiss me first, before you say a word. Remember that I have been wanting you for three months, and it seems so much longer lying here.”

The words escaped her before she had time to stop them. She saw Philip’s face, in the dim light, turn first white, and then crimson, and he drew himself up, away from her touch, out of reach of her wistful eyes.

"Go on," she said quietly.

Philip's voice was low and quiet too—his face set into impenetrable reserve—his whole body seemed turned to stone.

"I want to tell you," he repeated, "about the gun. It wasn't on half-cock at all, Essie, that day, and when I put out my hand to you, I touched the trigger."

Essie turned her face into the pillow, in the silence that followed the slow words, and clasped her hands together, while she tried to still the beating of her heart.

"Phil," she said, in a faltering voice, "come closer."

He stooped his head. "I'm awfully sorry," he said, and his lips quivered.

"Phil! Phil!" cried Essie again, stretching out her arms, and clinging to his neck. "Why, I knew it all along—ages ago—don't mind. I don't, in the least! It isn't," she added, with a swift, bright smile, "as if I was to be a cripple always—and nurse says I am an ornament to human nature now, and you know she did not always think so."

Philip tried to smile also, but failed ignominiously, and buried his face in the bedclothes,

his whole frame quivering with sobs. The clock ticked on, and they both were silent for a few moments, in one of those rare silences of perfect sympathy. Essie's caressing fingers lingered lovingly on the boy's head, bent and ashamed, and her eyes were full of bright tears. This moment had been almost as hard for her as for him. Perhaps we never truly realise how wide the ripples round our dropped pebbles circle out—how hardly our faults and failings strike those who love us.

"I will tell them all to-morrow," said Philip, scourging himself for his tardy reparation. "Is there anything more I can do?"

"No, you will not," said Essie decidedly, "if I can control you. People here do not understand, and I hate explaining. No, Phil, you shall tell no one but me."

But Philip had risen at last, and was standing pale, firm, erect, beside the bed—a sudden dignity seemed to have brightened his face, and driven the sullen look away—his eyes looked straight at Essie—his voice was quite firm.

"I will not tell them here if you would really rather not, Essie," he said, "but we will

write to father—both of us—that is only fair, I think. I was disobedient to him, you see, although I am awfully sorry. I would like him to know, and it is better to tell him myself.”

“And then, Phil,” said Esther, stroking his cheek gently, “we shall have one secret to keep, that no one else in the world will know except ourselves.”

“Essie,” said Philip solemnly, “you are a brick.”

“Am I?” said Essie, laughing softly to herself. “I suppose I ought to say ‘Thank you.’”





CHAPTER XXII.

A MINOR IN THE CAROL.

"A loving farewell of our several friends."

LET me show you the Chesters for the last time. It is Christmas Eve. The drawing-room door is locked so that no prying eyes may catch a glimpse of the Christmas tree, whose hundred tapers will twinkle like a hundred eyes when they are lighted to-night. Essie's sofa is covered with snips of silk and satin, out of which she is putting the finishing touch to the dressing of her dolls; while Miss Agnew, sitting near, is busy with the numbering of the tickets.

"Shut your eyes," Essie says presently, "so as not to look at your present—there! it is safe;" and the work goes on. The room is enlivened by Essie's brisk chatter, and by

Philip's occasional rapid entrance and exit—Philip, with a new look on his face, that makes him older somehow, and taller. Miss Agnew has to look twice at him before she can make it out—but an answering light that she catches in Essie's eyes is a revelation.

Philip is busy in the locked drawing-room with a ladder and a ball of string—he is whistling to himself as he works, and every five minutes he finds occasion to dash upstairs to Esther's room.

He opens the door and stands in the bright sunlight falling from the window above Essie's head—a schoolboy! at what people, even the wisest, call the troublesome age—a boy with possibilities of good in him, as all boys have—a boy, not a general favourite by any means, but with latent and undeveloped powers—a boy who will one day be a man. This thought strikes Miss Agnew suddenly as she lifts her head and sees him. He has not been a favourite at home—he is too silent, too sullen, too indifferent of the family opinion; but she feels sorry for him now as he stands bright, diffident, shy in the doorway.

“Working hard,” she says cheerily; “well

done!" and she smiles at him with unusual warmth.

She is surprised into a blush almost, when she sees the odd, doubting, trembling smile answer hers—when he lifts his eyes, so like Essie's, when they are wistful, with a look in them that is grateful and trusting, like the eyes of a dog.

A week ago, Miss Agnew, if she had felt any sentiment at all regarding the schoolboy Philip, would have locked it away in her own heart, as we so often do our better impulses, and he would never have been the wiser. Now, guided by some keen instinctive feeling, she holds out her hand and touches his.

"I do not know what we should do without you, Philip," she says. "We need a male creature to help us sorely."

Philip looks taller and straighter still as he goes out. Annie, by that timely word, has given him a place, not only in their little world, but in his own estimation.

Now for a last peep at Grumphie—restless, happy, healthy Grumphie—who is down on the rug just now, in front of the dining-room fire, teaching pussy to dance a polka. Poor pussy,

meek and patient, submits to the useless torture of being set up on her hind legs with piteous whines.

"One, two, three—hop!" says Grumphie—"hop higher, puss!"

Chrissie, who is practising "God save the Queen" on the piano with one finger, twists herself gravely round on the music stool to remonstrate.

"It is very cruel of you, Grumphie," she says. "How would you like a great, big, *monstrous* person to come and seize hold of you and worry you like that? You had better leave off."

"But I am not a great, big, *monstrous* person," says Grumphie, in shrill and eager denial; "and, besides, pussy likes it—she purrs all the while—I can hear her;" and he seizes pussy round the place that Chrissie calls her "waist," and puts his ear close to her.

"She's not purring just now," he says; "you frightened her, Chris—she were a minute ago—she likes knowing how to dance, don't you, darling?" and the piteous whines announce that the lesson has recommenced. The same sun-

shine that is lingering in Essie's room upstairs has slanted in here also, to the detriment of the fire, and it gilds Grumphie's round, close-cropped head, and Chrissie's curls, until Chrissie, turning round, says suddenly—

“Pull down the blinds, please, Grumphie, the fire is going out.”

And Grumphie, always ready for a little diversion, obeys.

The same sun that the children shut out is lying over the churchyard also, at the far end of the little town. The cross on the church spire has caught its radiance, so has the cross under the lime-tree by the wall. Tom's grave is rarely lonely—it is so close to the road and the wall, over which people lean and linger, chattering—busy men and women on their way to market—lovers at evening time—weary mothers, who put their babies down, and stand resting—just now some children have toddled through the railings, and are leaving tiny footprints in the snow, as they shout after each other—one older than the rest traces the black letters on Tom's cross with a plump, steady hand, and reads the words monotonously aloud—

"Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him."

She understands nothing of their grand profession of a perfect faith—a faith that could remove mountains; but she likes the sound, and she says them over once or twice aloud, in her low sing-song voice. A woman who has just come into the churchyard, with a wreath of holly in her hand, stops abruptly, and stands, straight and solemn, in the bright sunlight, looking up with a look on her face that is more beautiful than a smile, more pathetic than tears.

It is Mrs. Flynn.

She has grown whiter, older, quieter, in these last three months—she clings more to her children, and less to the little petty village world—her treasures being in Heaven, her heart has followed them, and she trusts—not for a while, but for ever—not for the unsatisfying peace of earth, but for the peace that passeth understanding—not for time, but for eternity.

So my story ends.

I have brought you to Tom's grave last, on purpose. The others have all their own stories to finish yet, but Tom's is ended. They

have their victories to gain, their rest to earn, their eternal life to win; but Tom has gone away from wars and rumours of wars, from weariness and pain, and has entered into the kingdom of heaven as a little child.



